



A Bias Toward Teams: Are We Teaming Well? Does It Even Matter? Implications for Teams in Public School Districts From a Case Study at Boston Public Schools

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A Bias Toward Teams: Are We Teaming Well? Does It Even Matter?
Implications for Teams in Public School Districts from a
Case Study at Boston Public Schools

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)
Capstone

Submitted by
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Dedications

With immense gratitude, I dedicate my work in this capstone to a number of important people who have made my experience so special.

First and foremost, to my mother and father: I owe everything I am to each of you. To my parents, to my sister and brother, to my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, and to my darling nieces: thank you for always loving me and for relentlessly encouraging me to be who I am.

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Abstract

Teams are at the heart of change efforts in public school districts all over the country. Within central offices, the nature of systems-level reform generally requires collaboration amongst diverse people with diverse perspectives, sitting across bureaucratic silos and altitudes, who come together to respond and react to school needs and district priorities. Teams are thought of as intrinsic to the work of public education, as a structure that can harness expertise and capacity to address complex, seemingly intractable problems that have dogged districts for decades.

But are teams really necessary to get the work done? If they are, what chances do teams have to flourish or survive amidst the bureaucratic accountability that characterizes most school districts – or to advance the tough work of change that district leaders task them with?

In this capstone, I explore and challenge what I consider to be a fundamental bias toward teams and teamwork in public K-12 school district change efforts. While the intent to seek cross-functional collaboration holds potential to unlock innovative solutions, I argue that by and large public school districts are not yet set up to enable the success of teams – and I question whether or not that matters. Many district change efforts still move forward even when teamwork breaks down, largely because of the bureaucracy districts were seeking to overcome when they set teams up in the first place. In bureaucratic systems, team performance often goes under-recognized as the buck stops at individuals. While this approach is certainly expeditious, it has vast potential to undercut vertical and horizontal collaboration within organizations as well as to undermine the values and priorities that districts like Boston have put forward by exploiting the inequities of business-as-usual. Making forward progress toward district goals in spite of teams thwarts collaborative teaming efforts in the long run. It leaves little incentive for team members to change behavior, it preserves the status quo, and it distances district leadership from the system it has envisioned to better address teaching and learning needs.

I discuss these arguments through my lens of ten months of residency at Boston Public Schools, working on long-term instructional change strategies seeking to organizationally alter ways that central office provides supports to schools. I argue that – absent concerted efforts to cultivate the right task environment for teams to succeed – teams, their individual members, and the change efforts they seek to implement are likely to languish as districts fall back on the same structures that have produced limited outcomes for decades.

Prologue

I was assigned to Boston Public Schools (BPS) as a facilitator at the weeklong summer 2015 Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) institute at the Harvard Business School, fortuitously enough as a new leadership team was assuming control of the district. Dr. Tommy Chang, the incoming superintendent, was coming in with a lot of fresh, new ideas for how to improve instruction in the district, as well as with largely a new team in tow (both from outside the district and remixed from within) to get the job done. I was – and remain – inspired by his focus on instruction: as observers in the education sector know, it is not all that often that someone who really understands instruction – a teacher at heart – makes it to the superintendency. I was eager to find out exactly what change he was after, I was eager to learn from him and his senior team, and most of all I was eager to be a part of the work

Tommy – as he insists on being called – explained his plans to me over the course of phone calls, emails, and the week at PELP, which took place just five days after his official first day as superintendent of what is known as one of the highest performing urban districts in the United States (see for example NCES, 2015). He explained to me his theories on instruction and the ways he believes change comes about in schools and districts. He went to great lengths to explain models of adult collaboration around instruction – creating what he calls a “culture of we” to collaboratively tackle our biggest problems – and described how the central office can be reorganized to better support needs of schools. He gave the impression that only through collaboration among experts – through the formation of teams up, down, across, and all over the district – could we hope to eliminate the persistent opportunity and achievement gaps that have plagued a

district like Boston for decades. He argued that teams are a way to disrupt rather than to respond to the bureaucracy that characterizes public school districts.

After I gained an understanding of what his plans were and some of the way he thinks, I distinctly remember saying to Tommy in reflection of the priority he was placing on them, “You’re making a huge bet on teams.”

I do not quite remember his response, aside from an acknowledgment that teams certainly are the heart of his vision for change. I recall him being even-keeled in his reaction, as I have come to discover he is in almost all interactions, but I did not understand the gravity of my overly simplistic observation at the time. Tommy very well may have understood the extent to which he was leaning on teams as the structure that will make the big change happen, but for me it was a huge introduction to the world I was about to enter at BPS. I have lived every day of my residency in vivid realization of this observation.

Teams are the heart of nearly every change effort in the district. In my observation and estimation, almost nothing is attempted alone. The nature of the systems-level work generally requires collaboration amongst different people with differing views, who come together in some degree or fashion to respond and react to schools’ needs. While another possible solution might be bureaucracy, teams are thought of as inherent to the work: public education is big, rich, complex, and full of intractable problems, so how could anyone do it alone? Teams are a way to harness expertise and capacity from within and across functional units of siloed organizations to tackle the problems that have dogged districts for decades. As described by Higgins, Weiner, and Young (2012), “today, and particularly in contexts such as education where the urgency

for change is acute, attention has shifted from solo models of leadership to more collaborative forms of leadership. Additionally, pressure has mounted to tackle intransigent problems by moving beyond designing new strategies for change to focusing on how to effectively implement system-wide change” (p. 20-21).

Teams are thought of as a solution to the chaos and the immense diversity and magnitude of challenges a district faces. Teams can have extraordinary windfall in the collaborative experiences they foster, including finding answers and generating new ideas to some of the most difficult challenges an organization faces. Teams are a manifestation of very diverse sets of knowledge and expertise brought to bear on a system serving a student population equally as diverse. The intersections of teams – and the knowledge and expertise sets of the individuals who compose them – spread across structures of the organization, turning the neat compartments and ladders of hierarchy into a latticework of individuals working on problems that cut across the organizational chart. This ultimately can create significant problems of accountability, even as teams seem necessary to sustain and improve a high-quality educational experience, especially if the ends or the means that teams are pursuing or the roles that individuals or teams play are under-defined.

Despite the challenges associated with teamwork, my experiences during residency at BPS have shown me that teamwork is the instinctual first response to nearly every challenge and seemingly an implied assumption about the way work gets done. We rely on teams to do everything, bespeaking a hidden commitment that all things are possible only through collaboration. This concept is not new to me: I have read dozens of district case studies in the course of my academic career documenting these attempts, and

I have been part of myriad teams throughout my time in educational organizations and governmental institutions. However, I had underestimated the extent to which teams are the implied *modus operandi* for nearly all change the district pursues – and how fundamentally biased toward teams we are. This bias even appears in the curriculum of the Doctor of Education Leadership program at Harvard University, where study and praxis of team membership and leadership characterizes the first-year academic experience. Over the course of my residency year, I began questioning this bias, asking myself and others whether or not we really need teams to achieve the missions we set out to achieve and – if we do need them – whether or not we properly set them up to drive organizational performance.

Truthfully, I did not come into residency expecting to or hoping to write about teams. Like many who have endured the toils of large bureaucracies, teamwork can sometimes feel like misery in unwieldy organizations. Even a novice bureaucrat will recognize the questions that have run through my mind countless times: *Why are we doing this in a meeting? What does this team even do? Can I go back to my desk now and finish this task alone?* I did not go out looking for teams, but my conscription onto more and more teams and more and more collaborative tasks than I could count certainly pushed me there.

With all of this in mind, I set about this capstone with the following guiding questions that I then relate to my time at BPS:

Guiding Questions:

- 1) Who or what is in a team?
- 2) What specifically are we asking teams to do?
- 3) How are we intentionally nurturing and sustaining teams to realize the big bets we are making on them?
- 4) How are teams called to account for their performance within the context in which they operate?

In this capstone, I begin by providing key context for my work at BPS and a description of the project and work I was brought on to perform. I then provide a brief review of relevant literature in seeking out answers to these four guiding questions. Then, I posit a theory of action for how I, as Director of Instructional Strategy for the Academics and Student Supports for Equity Team (ASSET) at BPS, might best support my roles on various teams within the organization to create impact in our long-term instructional priorities. I turn to a review and analysis of my real, lived experiences on teams within BPS, reflecting both on my own perspectives and accomplishments in the work and those of my colleagues in attempting interdependent teamwork and tasks to achieve organizational objectives. After presenting and analyzing my findings, I close with implications from my work on and study of the teams at BPS, teams more broadly leading reforms in urban school districts, and for myself as a leader in these environments.

I caveat my findings by drawing attention to the limitations of my findings and conclusions. By no means is what I present intended to be representative of experiences and outcomes across BPS leaders, employees, or affiliates. While I come at my guiding questions and diagnosis of the work with rigorous, analytical, and methodical approaches to evidence gathering and analysis, the capstone is also a thoughtful, personal reflection on leadership (my own and that of others) through ten months of lived experience in an

urban school district. While I take great efforts to represent and reflect the direct input of others at BPS, the conclusions and reflections here are ultimately my own and do not stand as an organizational reflection, endorsement, or statement of Boston Public Schools.

Chapter 1. Introduction: Context and Description of Strategic Project

James Q. Wilson (1989), a scholar of bureaucracy, once noted that bureaucracies were formed when several people realized they could not perform a task acting alone, but if they got together, they could accomplish the task. The problem was, he claims, once they got together, they forgot about the task.

During my residency year at Boston Public Schools (BPS), I sought to learn whether and how initiatives launched from the central administrative office (herein referred to as “central office”) were implemented through the use of teams. I led with this teaming focus partly because of the observation that the problems teams sought to address cut across organizational boundaries – both from staff to line, and across different problem areas in performance. The commitment to teams somehow seemed deeper than the requirements for cross-boundary collaboration; it seems as though a commitment to teams and to collaborations permeated everything that BPS does. This bias toward teams could be great if the teams actually do work that improves the performance of the schools; it also could be troublesome if it wastes time or distracts energy or attention from what is most important in achieving real improvements in instructional performance across all students.

In large part, my line of inquiry centered on whether or not teams are actually able to make progress toward the tasks they have been assigned, and then – in the case of failure or success – what might be the reasons why they fared the way they did. While my findings over a ten-month period fall far short of being able to observe improved outcomes in student performance, my approach required me to learn about teams and their capacities and behaviors to achieve the lofty vision of change toward which they

aspire. In keeping with this line of inquiry, I have thought about my work at BPS in two broad categories: a narrow mandate and a wide mandate. I first describe key context surrounding my work through a description of the district's Strategic Implementation Plan. I then describe the narrow mandate and the wide mandate individually. I use both mandates to generate my personal theory of action for my residency at BPS, which appears in Chapter 3.

Key Context

Overall, my work at BPS is focused on support and implementation of select instruction-centered components of the Boston Public Schools' Strategic Implementation Plan, "Stronger Schools; Stronger Boston: A Plan to Foster Equity, Coherence, and Innovation throughout Boston Public Schools" (herein referred to as "SIP" or "the Plan"). The Plan was released in draft in June 2016, presented to the Boston School Committee in July 2016, and finalized and formally adopted by the School Committee and the district in August 2016.

The SIP lays out a long-term vision for instruction and operations of the Boston Public Schools, spanning from the time of its release in 2016 through 2021. It spells out the challenges facing BPS and its students and puts forward a path to generate school and system-wide improvements in opportunity and achievement for all Boston youth. It is rooted in the Boston School Committee's "Strategic Vision for the Boston Public Schools," which the Committee unanimously approved in 2015 (prior to the appointment of current Boston Superintendent Dr. Tommy Chang) following eighteen months of engagement with the community. The School Committee's vision contained five aspirational goals for the next five years and served as the substantive basis for the

Strategic Implementation Plan as put forward by Superintendent Chang for approval by the mayoral-appointed School Committee in 2016 (Boston School Committee, 2015).

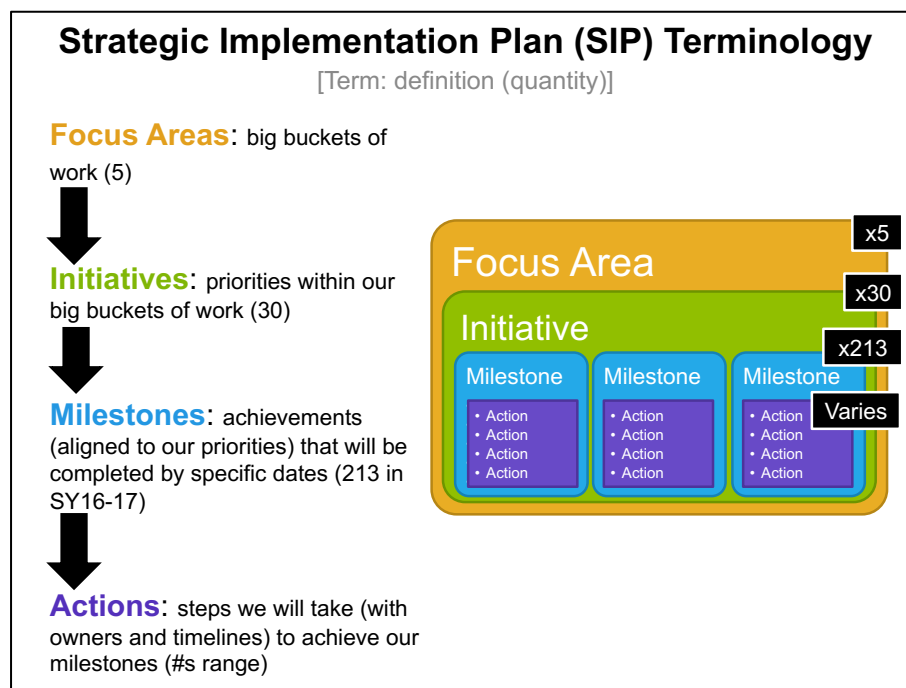
After his appointment in March 2015 and throughout his first year in office (July 2015 – June 2016), Superintendent Chang continued the outreach, engagement, and learning the School Committee started in assessing the current state of BPS and the efforts needed to catalyze reform. As an encapsulation of what his administration learned and the vision of change they seek, a transition team laid out a 100-day plan and three core values to drive forward all of the work of the district and its over 10,000 employees across 125 schools and one central administrative office (Boston Public Schools, 2016). The values of equity (“eliminating system bias and providing authentic learning opportunities for all students”); coherence (“focusing BPS’ business model on teaching and learning, and building an efficient way to use resources to deliver services and obligations within and outside the organization”); and innovation (“building a culture of change; generating new solutions, not just relying on current operational models”) were selected as galvanizing forces to address the problem of practice the district has identified for itself: “BPS does not consistently provide authentic learning opportunities for our students who are most marginalized to develop into self-determined, independent learners, able to pursue their aspirations. Our failures lead to disengaged students and significant achievement gaps” (Boston Public Schools, 2016, p. 4). It is noteworthy that BPS’s problem features first-person narration and reflects a plain-stated admission that district actions and inactions in the past have yielded the inequitable and inconsistent patterns of instructional achievement and opportunity that students experience today.

A taxonomy of the Plan (see Figure 1.1) communicates the vast ground covered

by it. Guided by an instructional theory of action that names adult learning as the key lever for spurring change (see Appendix A), the wide-ranging Plan contains a multitude of focus areas, initiatives, and milestones that describe what BPS will do to drive improvement in teaching and learning in all BPS schools and increase efficiency and quality in key operational and business areas. The five “focus areas” define the broad domains of the change efforts; within each focus area, “initiatives” describe the projects to be tackled to achieve that change (ranging from 3-13 initiatives per focus area); within each initiative, “milestones” communicate key deadlines and progress points in achieving those projects (which range from 3-12 per initiative). It touches on a wide array of both the day-to-day work that takes place across schools and within central office, while also addressing strategic and long-term challenges that will take time to fully diagnose and take action.

Figure 1.1

Taxonomy of the Boston Public Schools' Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP)



While the Plan is lengthy and fairly comprehensive, some high-profile work-streams and outputs for the district (including its Opportunity and Achievement Gap Policy, as well as its Long-Term Financial Plan) are only alluded to in the SIP; they exist largely as standalone efforts and documents. This makes the SIP fairly comprehensive in its reflection of district priorities, but still is one of several in a constellation of critical, long-term work-streams the district is tackling.

It is also worth noting that a defining feature of the Boston system is the extent of autonomy school leaders have to make decisions about instruction and operations of schools (including staffing and budget). Known as “principals” in grades K-8 school configurations and “headmasters” in grades 7-12 school configurations, the central office channels resources and support to school leaders and holds them accountable for school

performance. The full extent of this autonomy is far-reaching, and nowhere is it greater than in the area of instruction. Empowered by the philosophy that those closest to instruction know best what is needed, Superintendent Chang readily embraced the long-standing Boston paradigm of principal and headmaster as chief instructional leader (a belief he had held prior to his appointment at BPS) as well as operating manager. School leader autonomy is seen as central both to problem diagnosis and to the prescription and implementation of solutions for performance challenges at schools. While the centrality of school leader autonomy is thematically alluded to in the SIP, the exact parameters for the district's approach to school autonomy (e.g. autonomy for which decisions, autonomy in the presence of corrective action, variations in autonomy based on designated school type within the system, etc.) are largely absent from the Plan. I note this because school leader autonomy is very highly valued in the district, and so its omission from a strategic planning document communicates in some ways the extent to which this autonomy is implied or even enshrined in district practice. The ways that the district goes about school leader autonomy largely is not codified or described in great detail.

Narrow Mandate

I was brought onto the BPS's Academics and Student Supports for Equity Team (ASSET) to serve as the Director of Instructional Strategy, a position created for me as a doctoral resident to help shepherd and support the implementation of the seven instructional initiatives that are "owned" by the ASSET team in the Strategic Implementation Plan. These seven initiatives fall under Focus Area #1, which commits the district to "implement an inclusive, rigorous, and culturally and linguistically sustaining pre-K-12 instructional program that serves the development of the whole

child” (Boston Public Schools, 2016, p. 13). The initiatives span a variety of instructional supports, services, resources, and investments that aim to expand access to high-quality instruction for all students. They do this by providing “quality curricular and instructional guidance and resources to support instruction that develops literacy, language, and knowledge acquisition across contents, while promoting social emotional wellness;” and expanding rigorous, diverse coursework including through a pilot program to increase access to higher rigor and more diverse curricula and intensive enrichments (Boston Public Schools, 2016, p. 13). The milestones also reflect commitments to targeted subpopulations of students that may have become marginalized within the district, namely: English learners, students with disabilities, students of color, and early learners. See Appendix B for full text of ASSET-owned SIP initiatives.

In my capacity as Director of Instructional Strategy, I support the work of the five offices that comprise ASSET in implementing and attaining their long-term strategic goals in the SIP (see Appendix D for organizational charts). In effect, I am the support for the support for those who teach and lead at the school level in the district. I also hold the team accountable for its progress toward strategic objectives. My work entails tracking progress toward milestones; providing guidance and assistance in implementation or timing of initiatives; and fostering organizational learning alongside execution of the 51 milestones that fall under ASSET’s purview in the Plan’s initiatives 1.1 - 1.7 in School Year 2016-17. This entails working closely and collaboratively with the Assistant Superintendents who are accountable for each initiative to identify Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that reflect inputs and process metrics toward the long-term goals (e.g. interim writing or revision deadlines for new policies toward sequential arts education

programming or expansion of dual language classrooms) as well as emerging evidence of success from the our strategic efforts (e.g. reduction in rates of chronic absenteeism for students experiencing homelessness or a drop in suspensions for minor/non-violent offenses). These KPIs, while not solely attributable to the offices' strategic efforts, attempt to keep offices focused on the chief symptoms we have identified in the district's problem of practice.

Day to day, my responsibilities include convening and running strategy meetings with ASSET assistant superintendents and executive directors to discuss progress toward strategic goals; troubleshooting, assisting, or offering support in implementation for fulfillment of long-term goals or with concrete implementation tactics; providing counsel to the Deputy Superintendent or Superintendent on monitoring and planning around the organization's long-term and strategic goals; communicating out and reporting up within the organization areas of success or redirection/learning; and facilitating adult learning around performance on Plan initiatives and milestones, especially when those initiatives or milestones are implemented through cross-functional or cross-office teams.

Broader Mandate

My work at BPS can also be viewed through a wider-angle lens, going beyond solely the Strategic Implementation Plan to additional aspects of ASSET teamwork and (explicit and implicit) instructional strategy. This broader mandate, so to speak, recognizes a few key dimensions in the role of doctoral resident that I have taken on as a student of systems and a learner at BPS.

First and most importantly, a wider lens is crucial for me to gain a thorough and authentic diagnosis of the environment in which I operate at BPS and the environment in

which BPS operates as a system. I cannot move ahead my work of making change in the system, nor can I understand the system's lived theory in use, without first understanding and exploring the assumptions and mental models for how the organization and the team performs its day-to-day and long-term change work. Surfacing this mental modeling is also crucial for me to be able to successfully implement my narrow mandate as described above (e.g. in figuring out exactly how the Plan came into existence, whose ideas and authorization it reflects, and the logic it embodies in creating the change the district seeks).

A second key dimension for my broader mandate is the creation of ASSET itself. The formation of the Academics and Student Supports for Equity Team is relatively new, dating back only to April 2016 (prior to my arrival at BPS). What previously existed as five separate offices in three distinct organizational units all merged together to become one larger division within BPS. See the rendering below in Figure 1.2, and organizational charts in Appendix D:

Figure 1.2

Academics and Student Supports for Equity Team (ASSET) as “Instructional Roundtable”

“AS” = Assistant Superintendent



The idea for ASSET was encapsulated in the language of SIP Focus Area #1 itself, i.e. that in order for BPS to achieve the ambitious charge laid out to “implement an inclusive, rigorous, and culturally and linguistically sustaining PK-12 instructional program that serves the development of the whole child,” the organization must reorganize to facilitate an instructional roundtable in which diverse skillsets and expertise came together to provide more unified support attuned to the full needs of a child (Boston Public Schools, 2016, p. 13). Prior to this reorganization, business-as-usual was generally described as siloed in the central office for mostly functional and oversight purposes. Respective offices tackled fragmented components of the child’s identity (e.g. language

or disability status), a legacy owed mostly to decades of funding streams and programs from federal and state education agencies that (out of compliance and/or support) bureaucratized central offices around discrete aspects of a child's identity. This approach took decidedly less consideration of the end-user experience as recipient or consumer of a BPS education (i.e. student or family). Shifting central office's orientation more toward meeting the needs of whole children represents a major pivot in the history of Boston's central office, attempting to bring coherence and collaboration to historically deep roots of incoherence and division. Because business-as-usual would not suffice for this vision laid out in the SIP, ASSET was formed in order to take on the tough work encapsulated in this ambitious vision of better meeting the needs of students and families – and the teachers and school leaders serving them – across Boston's communities. The vision for ASSET is that of an instructional roundtable, where seemingly distinct or competing viewpoints can come together to forge equal partnerships in action toward truly addressing needs of the whole child.

In many ways, my job at BPS is coach of the newly formed leadership team that provides direction and day-to-day management of ASSET as a division and the five offices that compose it. Working both with a team of eight other leaders, as well as with the staffs of five organizational units, I serve as a facilitator to help leaders and their teams to better coalesce and collaborate around the district's vision for instruction. With the Deputy Superintendent of ASSET (to whom I report), I have established and supported many of the structures and mindsets for successful teams that I discuss in Chapter 2 so that this new and unprecedented division can come together to fundamentally do business differently. As a division in and of itself, ASSET represents a

big “bet” on how the district’s leaders believe we must be doing the day-to-day and long-term strategic work. I use the gambling metaphor intentionally: the district has placed a high value and priority on this team to lead instruction differently, but it comes with some inherent risk in erring back toward the siloed way BPS has always done business. Much of my daily work, thus, is setting up intentional teaming experiences to promote perspective taking, empathy and respect building, cross-functional learning, and collaborative execution of projects and initiatives to attain the vision of the good we believe we can only attain by crossing our organizational boundaries. I work with each member of the ASSET team individually, in small groups, and as a whole unit in developing the sense of team we profess to need and want as a district to attain the vision we seek for student opportunity and achievement.

Further, it is also incumbent on me to pursue this broader mandate so that I can more fully understand whether or not we are generating value and achieving our mission as a BPS central office in line with the expectations of our authorizing environment. The products created by central office (e.g. professional development, instructional tools, access to data) only have value inasmuch as those who would consume or benefit from them similarly believe in and want their value. I often refer to this conversationally with my colleagues as the “vision of the good,” but it can more broadly be characterized by Moore’s (1995) concept of public value: what do we believe good teaching and learning looks like in Boston Public Schools? And from this understanding, to what ends are BPS graduates contributing to the community, society, and democracy of Boston? How do our high-quality teaching and learning experiences bring BPS graduates toward these ends? Achieving a shared understanding of public value within the central office environment

alone (among the individuals, teams, and offices that Moore would consider part of the organization's operational capacity) can be a significant challenge; expanding that to the broader authorizing environment (among the public figures and interests who Moore would say offer legitimacy and support to BPS's efforts) can be even more elusive. Despite our silos, and even given the semi-autonomous nature of our schools, Superintendent Chang has called on and empowered teams to work through disparate viewpoints and come together to provide the operational capacity to implement the instructional vision.

Firmly grounding my work in the overarching public value proposition the district is putting forward is essential for any degree of successful implementation of strategic objectives. As Childress (2004) noted on strategy in public education, "strategy is about choosing – choosing what to do, and just as importantly, choosing what *not* to do" (p. 1). For me, navigating my work in supporting the 7 initiatives and 51 milestones owned by ASSET in the Strategic Implementation Plan thus must necessarily entail seeking to understand the value being generated by the district within and apart from the Plan through the lenses of those in our authorizing environment, who feel varying degrees of agreement in what the district has chosen to do and what not to do through its express and implicit strategy. While public-facing relations may not be an explicit component of my strategic project, it was critical to focus on making meaning through the eyes of those consuming or producing central office work products. Not incorporating their perspective would significantly inhibit my contributions and render nearly meaningless the efforts we put toward strategic aims.

In summary, all of these pieces – from the narrow mandate of implementation and

support of SIP initiatives 1.1 – 1.7, to the broader mandate of understanding value considerations within and beyond central office – come together to form my role as resident and Director of Instructional Strategy for ASSET at BPS. While additional projects were also added to my portfolio over the course of my ten months with BPS, the themes of planning, executing, and reflecting on performance toward key strategic objectives was the throughline of all my efforts. I have fleshed out this approach to the work in greater detail in my theory of action for residency year, which appears in Chapter 3. First, however, I look to the literature and research to understand core theoretical underpinnings that make both teams and districts work in the context of a city like Boston.

Chapter 2: Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA)

Herein, I explore four key questions central to the work of teams in the context of leading instructional improvement at scale in the setting of an urban school district like Boston Public Schools (BPS):

Guiding Questions:

- 1) Who or what is in a team?
- 2) What specifically are we asking teams to do?
- 3) How are we intentionally nurturing and sustaining teams to realize the big bets we are making on them?
- 4) How are teams called to account for their performance within the context in which they operate?

The literature on using teams to improve organizational performance is dominated by several important authors and works. A close review of this literature reveals an important tension between the principal theories advanced. One group of authors – teaming scholars Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman in their 2008 book *Senior Leadership Teams* – focuses on a combination of the structural conditions that those in positions of authority use to create, manage, and hold accountable particular kinds of teams. Another – teaming scholar Edmondson and her 2012 book *Teaming* – focuses on the more psychological and cultural characteristics of the members of a team, and the way their interactions with one another are facilitated at the micro level by particular kinds of behaviors. While Wageman et al. (2008) explain in great detail the way to maximize performance of a senior leadership team through “essential characteristics” of structure and design, Edmondson sometimes flouts the notion of these essential characteristics, questioning whether they can exist (or, at the very least, actually do exist or persist) in many organizational contexts. Teams are an exercise in dynamism according to Edmondson (2012), characterized by “the mindset and practices of

teamwork” (p. 41), whereas Wageman et al. would suggest that structures and design elements of teams are most critical in ensuring team effectiveness. Teaming, Edmondson (2012) argues, “involves coordinating and collaborating without the benefit of stable team structures, because many operations...require a level of staffing flexibility that makes stable team composition rare” (p. 41). On the other hand, Wageman et al. extol the need for teams to be both bounded and stable in order for them to even be considered a real team.

I have found both perspectives to be helpful in understanding teams across BPS. I have also found the theories that both sets of authors bring forward to be limited in the real-life context of a bureaucratic public sector institution like an urban school district. A variety of authors who have studied the context of the local education agency (including Moore and Alonso, 2014 and Cohen and Spillane, 1992) lay out critical context to understand how teaming efforts may be undermined in a bureaucratic context, either by design or as a casualty of large systems-level forces. Other authors (including Higgins, 2012 and Weick, 1976) explain that many of the essential conditions and enabling structures may not actually be as necessary as Wageman et al. would argue, in large part because of the inherent instability of school districts. My goal is to use these dueling perspectives to demonstrate what theory says is necessary for teams to be effective in driving organizational performance while also elucidating the limitations of theory in the context of public education. I hope also to draw out the tension in both the verb form of team (i.e. teaming and teaming processes the way that Edmondson describes) in order to get to the productive end-state of teams in a noun form in the way that Wageman et al. describe (i.e., moving toward highly interdependent, bounded, and stable entities). In

later sections, I draw on this synthesis to explore the efforts and impacts of BPS in creating change by relying on teams, and my own personal efforts to diagnose, evaluate, and support these efforts.

1. Who or What Is in a Team? | Team Members and Essential Characteristics

“Unfortunately, [this] is a question that most executives either ignore or assume they’ve answered – until they begin to experience the frustration of a dysfunctional team” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. XV).

Who or what is in a team is something I have found surprisingly hard to nail down, as teams across Boston Public Schools (BPS) often face porous boundaries and unclear membership. Seemingly the simplest question is: where and how does one draw the line of which members are on a team and which members are not?

Wageman et al. (2008) identify “three essential characteristics” of teams: they are interdependent, bounded, and stable. In Table 2.1, I summarize these characteristics:

Table 2.1

The Three Essential Characteristics of “Real Teams,” adapted from Wageman et al., 2008

Interdependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Members share responsibility for achieving a collective purpose” (p. 43) which draws “heavily on their colleagues’ special knowledge, skill, and experience in the work they do together” (p. 16).
Bounded	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Real teams have clear boundaries. Everyone knows who is a member and who is not” (p. 16).• “If you do not establish clear boundaries, your team cannot develop the collective identity that it needs to interact as a unit with external constituencies” (p. 48) or “the identity and shared sense of purpose that are needed for intense collaborative work” (p. 48-49).
Stable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Real teams “have stability, and members have the time and opportunity to hone their ability to work together” (p. 16), with

	“stable membership long enough to get to know one another’s special strengths and limitations” (p. 43-44).
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It has been my experience at BPS that team boundaries are generally loose, with a core concentration of leadership (though not always one designated leader) and more porous lines of general membership. Wageman et al. (2008) acknowledge this phenomenon of porous boundaries in that less than 7% of the 120 leadership teams they studied from across sectors and industries had agreement on who the members of the team were: “Simply asking the CEO to give us a list of team members provided diagnostic data about how clear the boundaries of the team were...and what chance it had of operating as a real team” (p. 12-13).

Wageman et al. (2008) argue that membership on the team should be as directed by the team leader and should reflect the unique value that each team member brings to the task and the purpose the team is being asked to perform. Selection of members goes beyond the individual experiences and skill sets members bring: it should also be a reflection of the teaming skills each individual can bring to the team being recruited. Chief executives must “make it clear that membership on the team requires certain teamwork capabilities beyond technical skills,” which means that once members are on a team, they must be willing to engage and be led on how to leverage their differences to contribute to the task at hand (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 84). This may mean that team members may have to not only discipline their own ego, but also in some ways set aside a commitment to the unit from which they have been drawn and its particular interests and structures of accountability to embrace accountability to the new team’s purpose. This is particularly tough when team members have been selected at least in part because of the

specialization that has been attached to their non-team organizational role. This understanding of purpose and accountability to a structure outside of one's functional unit is critical for successful sustaining of a team: without it, claim Wageman et al. (2008), "the work of the team inevitably feels less important than the work of the individual members, and they wander away to focus on what they see as the most important of their accountabilities" (p. 61).

This quest for diversity of viewpoints and perspectives must still be bounded in a reasonable number of team members. To take into account one type of team, Wageman et al. (2008) argue that most senior leadership teams are too large, and that in order to create "a thoroughly crafted *us*" (p. 82), senior leadership teams must be constrained in their size to be useful – typically to no more than 8-9 for real decision making (Wageman et al., 2008). Higgins et al. (2012) say that size can be even smaller depending on team task. In their study, the authors claim the best teams have been among the smallest. Even at lower levels of interdependence, the larger a team is, the more challenging it makes it to meaningfully tackle the tasks set before it. When teams are unconstrained in size, "the space needed for real interdependence, meaningful contribution, and team decision making tends to be squeezed out," as the number of relationships that must be managed expands and so too do the relational issues and coordination challenges that a team lead will have to deal with (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 19).

Once this small number of team members is selected, team members must know that "they are being selected for the project for a reason" (Edmondson, 2012, p. 98). This notification sounds like a small and obvious step, but one that is not always expressly stated across teams or organizations. Doing so builds the "intellectual and emotional

commitment to the implementation process and acts as an invitation to others to participate in shaping the specifics of the effort, in addition to helping execute” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 98-99).

Plausibility of team attributes. The core attributes of “real teams” – interdependence, boundedness, stability – may sit at the center of theory, but in the domain of school systems, their value may actually prove to be less important. In a study of teams in public education, Higgins et al. (2012) coined a term for a new type of team – “implementation teams” – that they defined as “a team charged with designing and leading the implementation of an organization-wide change strategy” (p. 1). These teams are cross-functional in nature, requiring individuals from across organizational silos and levels of hierarchy to come together around a strategic plan, aim, or interest. In their study of implementation teams, looking at team member learning as the key outcome variable in question, the authors found that “none of the ‘real team’ measures had a significant relationship with team member learning” (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 12).

While Wageman et al. (2008) traditionally think about individual people when describing the attributes of real teams, Higgins et al. (2012) suggest that – in the context of K-12 public school systems – grounding team interdependence, boundedness, and stability to individuals “may be less relevant than tying the same dimensions to team members’ roles” (p. 18). Because implementation teams face dynamic, cross-cutting work, the individuals on the team may come and go but the team may remain intact, bounded, and interdependent through the roles or positions represented on the team. The authors explain this phenomenon through the identities of those represented on these teams: “members of implementation teams are both representatives of different

constituency groups in the organization and members of the implementation team,” in effect holding dual identities based on their team membership and their level of seniority within the organization (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 3). This makes the people who compose the team both team member and stakeholder, creating and designing the change effort as well as living with and working through any decisions the implementation team makes. “With multiple identities in tow” (p. 4), Higgins et al. argue that the individuals on the team matter less for stability and that stability of roles that comprise a team matter more in this context: “stability may indeed be one important dimension of an implementation team, but that team stability may stem more from maintaining role membership than people membership” (2012, p. 15-16).

It is important to note that the traditional view of theory may not even characterize implementation teams as “real teams” with their fluctuating membership. Higgins et al. (2012) argue that sacrificing the team designation of implementation teams would cause real detriment to the organization, as implementation teams exhibit “potentially important and far-reaching impact on an organization’s change efforts” (p. 18). In a contrapuntal response to Wageman et al. on key characteristics of teams, Higgins et al. recommend the dimension of stability be reconsidered in the K-12 education context, calling these teams demonstrating role stability “very ‘real’” and that labeling teams with high individual turnover as defunct (or leaving them unsupported) could be a real mistake for the organization (2012, p. 19).

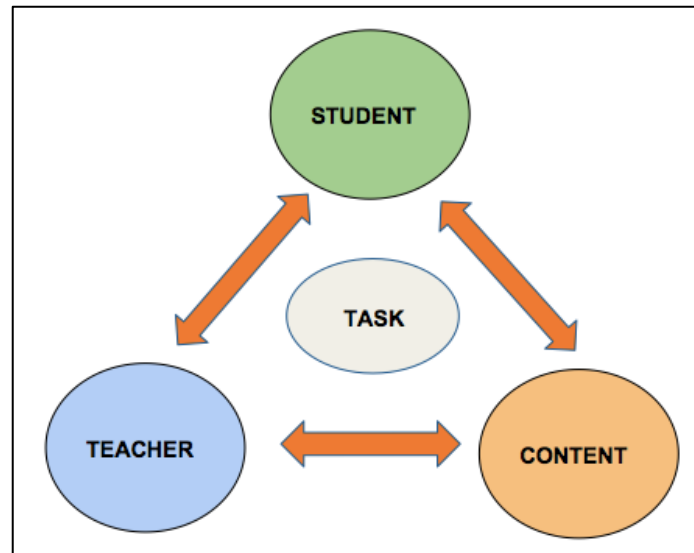
2. What Specifically Are We Asking Teams to Do? | Team Purpose and Task

“The best top teams are those whose leaders know exactly where they want to make the enterprise and have a strategy to get there, and who have articulated an explicit purpose for the team that focuses on the unique contributions it can make to realize that strategy” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. XVIII).

As I entered BPS, I quickly observed a lot of talk not only about teams but also about tasks, i.e. the specific assignment, work, or job to be done. Indeed, in the same way that the organization emphasizes teams in order to make change happen, it also speaks fluently about task as the intersectional nucleus inside the instructional core (see City et al., 2009) – where all the pieces come together in the relationship between student, teacher, and content:

Figure 2.1

Instructional core with task at center



When I took to the teaming literature, I was equally impressed by the centrality of task in gaining an understanding of a team purpose's and interdependence. How interdependence is constructed into the task the team performs – and according to a team's express purpose – says a lot about whether or not the team will be successful.

Wageman et al. (2008) argue that teams must be created, authorized, and used to “focus exclusively on what is this team for that no other entity in the organization could accomplish” (p. 22). Creating a team begs close, concise reflection on the specific actions that some specific mix of people can partake in to achieve some very specific end. Especially in the context of organizational silos, the concept of interdependence is introduced as a key ingredient to the success of these teams.

It is critical to define what exactly the interdependencies among members of a team are, and this can be done through the crafting of a compelling team purpose. A well-crafted team purpose highlights the interdependencies among members of the team; it can

then be used as a way to identify or vet which specific tasks the team leader decides should be taken on by the team. To land on a substantive degree of interdependence, Wageman et al. (2008) argue that leaders must articulate to their teams a purpose that is “not merely the sum of the individual members’ contributions” nor simply “the purpose of the organization,” but rather a purpose specific to that team that is “consequential,” “challenging,” and above all “clear” (p. 17).

A consequential purpose is one that is “crucial enough to be treated as the main job of the leaders and not as a side job when their individual roles are done” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 59). A consequential purpose conveys that the products of the team must be important, and must only be able to be produced by the members of that specific team. With purpose as a statement of consequence, members of the team (and certainly the team’s leader) should easily be able answer the question, “what are the few, critical things that only this team of senior leaders, of all the people in this organization, can accomplish?” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 59). They should feel as though the responsibilities they are in charge of as a team are at least tantamount in importance to their own individual responsibilities or those of their office.

Team purpose must also be “challenging enough but not impossible” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 59). On the one hand, this means not restricting the team to trivial tasks or low-level decisions that could easily be handled by an individual on (or off) that team; on the other hand, the team must also not be over-challenged by tasks that demand too much of them or do not reflect a balance with their individual responsibilities. If tasks err too much in either direction, team members will begin to associate team membership and purpose with a self-reinforcing negative experience. These two patterns emerged in

Wageman et al.'s (2008) research into setting the right level of challenge: team leads often over-challenged members in their individual leadership roles, "holding them to the highest performance standards and constantly raising the bar to test individual capabilities," but demanded too little from the leadership team as a whole (p. 60). As the authors question, "why challenge the individuals but restrict the team to trivia?" (p. 60).

Finally, the importance of clarity in team purpose cannot be understated – according to Edmondson and Wageman et al. but also starkly reflected in my experience at BPS. "Clarity of purpose makes the extraordinarily challenging and consequential work of senior leadership teams feel possible," according to Wageman et al. (2008, p. 62). However, of the three attributes of a strong team purpose, clarity is also the most elusive. It is threatened in an absence of shared understanding, manifesting through: 1) a leader's assumption that members' understanding or acknowledgment of the organization's mission statement leads automatically to understanding of a senior leadership team's purpose; 2) a lack of shared understanding of the organization's strategy, i.e. understanding explicitly the organizational logic and mental modeling of how resources and processes come together to achieve desired priorities; and 3) the level of sheer emotional courage that it takes to achieve and sustain clarity, especially as purpose gets refined and can threaten relationships by ruling out members' priorities, or uncovering discrepancies or conflicts about what members think their roles or contributions are or should be.

Purposes are often shrouded in assumptions, and it is the team leader's job to surface those assumptions for the sake of shared mental modeling for how this team will produce cause and effect. According to Wageman et al. (2008), organizational

researchers have emphasized the importance of team members having well calibrated mental models of their organization's strategy. It is not adequate, they claim, to assume that having heard the strategy or even being able to say it in the same words is sufficient: "Members must talk about the strategy as a team and play out its implications in direct conversation with one another" (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 65). Edmondson (2012) points out that effective teaming "requires integrating perspectives from a range of disciplines, communicating the different mental models that accompany different areas of expertise, *and* being able to manage the inevitable conflicts that arise when people work together" (p. 52). This is an incredibly challenging skillset for any individual member of a team to naturally come by or even grow into, demanding dexterity in "interpersonal skills related to learning (inquiry, curiosity, listening) and teaching (communicating, connecting, clarifying)" (Edmondson, 2012, p. 52). Surfacing and working through tacit assumptions, understandings, and beliefs about the baseline way that team members or their respective units work or pursue change is crucial for any team to truly achieve interdependence in purpose or task.

Teaming authors offer a wide array of typologies of teams, often relying on degrees of interdependence to draw boundary lines amongst team types. A team's purpose may range from something minimally interdependent like exchanging information to something much more highly interdependent like making decisions. This is not to necessarily imply that all teams exist solely for implementation of specific tasks. While all teams come together around some specific purpose, and that purpose is exemplified through the tasks that the teams perform, teams exist for reasons beyond execution of specific tasks. The degree of interdependence that teams must exhibit,

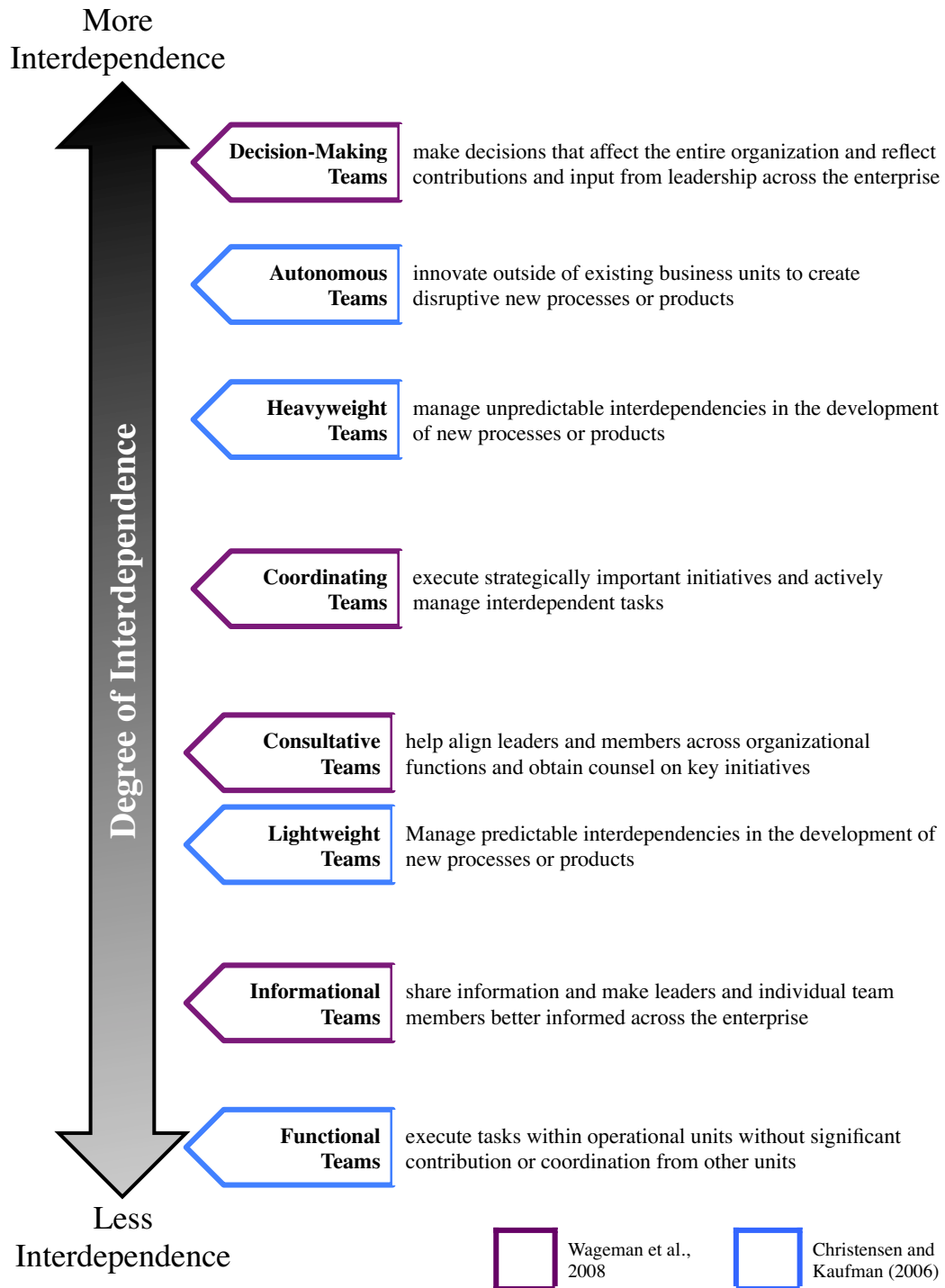
according to their purpose, offers a useful way to differentiate among types of teams.

While by no means exhaustive, I highlight two schemas for categorization of teams according to the degree of interdependence their purpose requires below in Figure 2.2. It is worth noting that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and often times teams can be characterized by more than one of these team types at the same time.

Wageman et al. (2008) claim that there are four principle types of senior leadership teams according to the interdependence of the purposes and tasks they pursue. Similarly, Christensen and Kaufman (2006) borrow from Wheelwright and Clark (1992) in also putting forward four different categories of teams that rely on degree and predictability of interdependencies to draw boundary lines for team types. Both typologies emphasize what would be needed across large, complex organizations drawing cross functionally on expertise and knowledge sets from different silos to achieve different aims.

Figure 2.2

Select typologies of teams according to degrees of interdependence



In the schemas presented in Figure 2.2, it is important to emphasize that teams often do more than execute: they serve functions and have subsidiary benefits that go beyond task execution to enhance other aspects of organizational performance. One way of considering these effects is through what Wageman, Hackman, and Lehman (2005) define as the three dimensions of team effectiveness. While the first dimension considers execution of the task and whether it met or exceeded the standards or expectations of those who evaluate or consume the team's work, team effectiveness is also defined by "how well members worked together now to enhance – rather than undermine – their capability to work together in the future" and "whether the group experience, on balance, contributed positively to the learning and personal development of individual team members." (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 10-11). While excellent performance in the latter two dimensions pay dividends to the team itself, their benefits also extend to individual team members and their organizational domains. The learning the team members acquire through the team experience helps them to better understand the context of their own work and the ecosystem in which their contributions are situated. Team experiences help individuals make connections between their own personal accountabilities (or those of their office) with those of others. Even at lower levels of interdependence such as coordination or information sharing, members can continue to grow and learn in ways that help them enhance their own personal performance through increased understanding of organizational strategy. Greater understanding of the task environment also stands to strengthen organizational performance as individuals and offices can make choices that better cohere or align with broader organizational strategy. The team experience, thus, strengthens not just the execution of discrete tasks but can have positive impacts on tasks

far beyond what a specific team has been charged to do.

As team purpose ascends in interdependence, the core work and number of tasks the team attempts should become quite limited. The tasks the teams perform should mirror the membership the teams boast: they both should be “large in impact and few in number” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 46). Great teams perform “only genuinely meaningful tasks,” which are concrete, “whole, and strategically important pieces of work” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 114 and p. 19). Reaching this threshold of interdependence is justifiably a high bar. In their research, the authors found “clear and strong tendency for struggling teams to be cursed with overly simple and trivial team tasks,” when in order to be successful members need “a short list of well-defined tasks that are mission critical” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 114 and p. 117).

Challenges to clarity of team purpose. As the tasks teams tackle increase in interdependence, so too must the collaborative spirit with which team members approach the work. Framing the team’s work in a way that feels consequential, challenging, and clear for the team is hard enough; doing so in a way that transcends organizational boundaries and encourages team members to actually expand their decision-making perspectives beyond their own interests or the interests of their organizational unit is an immensely challenging undertaking. In both of the illustrative schemas described in Figure 2.2, more highly interdependent tasks require team members to take action and make decisions on behalf of the entire organizational unit or organization and not just out of regard or perspective for their own business unit. If team members are not asked to perform tasks that entail the exchange of strategic information, coordination of enterprise-wide initiatives, or the making of vital decisions on behalf of the organization,

the teamwork will feel less important than their individual responsibilities, and (to repeat a previous statement) they will “wander away to focus on what they see as the most important of their accountabilities” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 61).

Even the teaming authors admit the ideal level of clarity in team purpose and adherence to an exclusive and small list of tasks is hard to come by. Many team leaders are all too eager to pile additional tasks onto the team’s plate if the need exists. Efforts toward teaming are also undercut by organizational features that run more toward division than integration. Institutional forces and organizational structures (like offices, units, and divisions) often reinforce a siloed mentality that is tough to overcome, especially in the environment of public sector bureaucracy. Even tasks that seem interdependent at surface level can backslide into a series of successive independent tasks according to the function of the individual or unit. Edmondson (2012) characterizes this phenomenon as “when the work is interdependent but teaming doesn’t occur:” work would unfold more smoothly if only team members coordinated their actions “as if they were members of a high performing team rather than individual specialists completing a series of separate tasks” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 45-46). This pernicious persistence of organizational silos has the ability to torpedo what otherwise might feel like more interdependent team purposes or tasks into highly choreographed routines – a kabuki of interdependence – in which “each person performs a task as efficiently as possible based on the needs of his/her specialized department” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 48).

Cohen and Spillane (1992) explain that these divisions within local education agencies (LEAs) and their central administrative offices are not accidental, and as a consequence they do not foster the most fertile ground for teaming. LEAs are governed –

formally and informally – by an ever-growing array of differing demands from public and private constituencies, down to the neighborhood level and up to the federal level. Local schools feel compelled to respond to these demands because they are locally and democratically governed. Further, the assistance and support that federal and state governments provide to LEAs has a byproduct: the creation and reinforcement of internal organizational silos. Both of these circumstances not only create internal fragmentation within LEAs, but they also weaken overall central organization in relation to sub-units that serve specialized missions and interests.

Cohen and Spillane (1992) explain how historically and “extraordinarily dispersed” power and authority have been in public education for decades, especially in the arena of instruction (p. 4). The authors argue that this foil is intentional: divisions were “carefully calculated to inhibit the coordinated action of government,” leaving authority most intact the closer you get to the local level or more granularly the student level (p. 5). While this line of reasoning draws into question whether or not central administrative offices can really influence what is happening at the classroom level, LEAs still maintain a great deal of control or influence over budget, staffing, programming, and other resources. Assuming it is possible for leaders and centralized staff to influence instruction through these levers, the organizational structure of districts makes the feat extraordinarily difficult.

Despite the relatively weak influence federal and state education agencies maintain in comparison to national ministries of education in other countries, the ways in which money flows from or through these entities to LEAs has come to necessarily divide up district central offices into a variety of silos. These silos exist to ensure that key

functions like the protection of civil rights for English learners, students with disabilities, and students of color are properly administered. LEAs comply with these dividing forces in exchange for funding – expressing, by extension, “an abiding hope for the power of government and a wish to harness it for social problem solving” and agreement with the theory that specialized attention (and resources and support) for marginalized groups of students will improve learning outcomes (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 8).

That hopeful notion is stubbornly persistent in nearly all urban school districts, divvying up staffs around fragmented aspects of a student’s identity rather than uniting them cross-functionally to tackle the whole set of a child’s needs. As expressed by the authors, “nearly all of these policies and programs sought to solve problems that crossed jealously guarded jurisdictional boundaries among and within governments” (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 8). These kinds of divisions within central office staff make it hard to establish and share a common, compelling purpose – one that is consequential, challenging, and clear enough for everyone involved in the task. While not impossible, institutional forces all but incentivize working against the more common aims that teams are often asked to achieve.

This kind of division also makes the shared mental modeling that Wageman et al. and Edmondson discuss as so important to teams much more challenging to come by. Divisional boundaries help establish and reinforce purposes within individual organizational units, but make it more difficult to understand across these boundaries. This is especially true in what Weick (1976) calls the “loose coupling” of K-12 education, referring to the fragmentation and incoherence that marks many (or most) state and local education systems and individual schools. In Weick’s argument, this loose

coupling is strategic: it maximizes flexibility within organizations by diminishing permanence of relationships between and among the composite units and entities within the organization, thereby allowing teams or alliances to come and go as the situation requires. In effect, loosely coupled parts of an education system “are responsive, but...each retains some identity and separateness” and “their attachment may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in its mutual affects” (Weick, 1976, p. 4). Loose coupling, the author argues, connotes “impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness, all of which are potentially crucial properties of the ‘glue’ that holds organizations together” (Weick, 1976, p. 4). In such a schema, anything within a system can be tied together – but generally speaking done so only weakly, irregularly, or impermanently; the end result is a minimal degree of interdependence with relatively low regard attached to it.

This conception of loose coupling of the components of education systems stands in sharp contrast to “the prevailing image that elements in organizations are coupled through dense, tight linkages” (Weick, 1976, p. 2). Composite parts of a system are bound together through some commonly held mechanism, such as a task or accountability, but at their core Weick argues that the identity and separation of units leads to only temporary attachment. While conventional authors might disagree, Weick argues this is positive, allowing for swift, localized adaptation of policies at the school and classroom level and avoiding the dangers of standardization in applying rigid solutions to diverse circumstances. This schema, though, holds vast pitfalls for teams within organizations – especially when it comes to establishing a common mental model for how the organization works or seeks to make change. In this understanding of reality, it becomes challenging to develop shared understanding of how a team’s unique purpose

fits into a broader organizational strategy—the same logic cannot be applied in all circumstances because relationships vary based on the situation. This leads Weick to argue that “parts of some organizations are heavily rationalized but many parts also prove intractable to analysis through rational assumptions” (1976, p. 1). While this makes organizational leadership more challenging, Weick would argue that this is actually just a more honest portrayal and representation of the state of affairs in education bureaucracies and their relative impotence in effecting change: “there is the even greater danger of portraying organizations in inappropriate terms which suggest an excess of unity, integration, coordination, and consensus...loose coupling is also a non-rational system of fund allocation and therefore, unspecifiable, unmodifiable, and incapable of being used as means of change” (1976, p. 5 and p. 8).

3. How Are We Intentionally Nurturing and Sustaining Teams to Realize the Big Bets We Are Making on Them? | Team Behaviors and Learning

“Creating a solid structure for your team may not feel like an urgent leadership task. . . . But they need structure. Well-chosen team members are capable of handling their individual responsibilities, but most have very little experience in working as a member of a truly interdependent leadership team” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 115).

While the inclination toward teaming can be beneficial, effective teams need structures as well as mindsets and beliefs to facilitate the actions that will lead them to success. Edmondson (2012) remarks that “effective teaming requires everyone to remain vigilantly aware of others’ needs, roles, and perspectives,” as it requires both “affective (feeling) and cognitive (thinking) skills in order to learn to relate to others better and learning to make decisions based on the integration of different perspectives” (p. 2). Both Edmondson and Wageman et al. argue that these kinds of behaviors and mindsets are

“anything but natural acts in large organizations” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 2).

In the discussion under the previous two questions, I have predominantly examined teams by looking at intentional design choices in structuring teams.

Edmondson (2012), however, prefers to think about teaming more as verb than as noun, defining “teaming” as “the activity of working together to carry out interdependent tasks” and characterizing teaming as “an active process, not a static entity” (p. 2). In reality, effective teaming relies on a mixture of structures as well as mindsets and beliefs.

Edmondson puts these together by describing four key behaviors that team members must engage in to make the teaming process successful. I discuss each of these four key behaviors below, with additional detail underneath each one about structures, mindsets, and beliefs that undergird each key activity.

Speaking up. Of the four key team behaviors, speaking up is most critical for facilitating honest, direct conversation among individuals or as a group, for giving and receiving feedback, and for discussing success and failure. Speaking up is highly complicated, though, with real or perceived power dynamics on teams or within organizations causing subordinates to often hesitate or feel loathe to voice anything that may feel like a critique of superiors.

While challenging initially, speaking up can be facilitated through the setting of deliberate structures that make an environment safer and more egalitarian for members to exercise voice. This structure is characterized by adherence to a strong set of team norms, or established expectations for behavior that govern team members’ actions both within and outside team meetings (Wageman et al., 2008). While sometimes characterized (or playfully lampooned) as the formal or informal list of “do” and “don’t” behaviors, a good

list of team norms discusses actions team members should abstain from and actions that members should proactively engage in to promote the health and productivity of the team. Wageman et al. (2008) found that the presence of clear norms of conduct had “the largest impact of any sub-feature of the six conditions on whether a leadership team was effective” in their study (p. 114). On a strong team, “members know precisely what is and what is not acceptable behavior in the team” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 114), and “whatever behavior the leader tolerates becomes part of the rules” (p. 132). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, team norms and expectations for behavior are intimately related to the size of the team and have enormous implications on the ability for the team to successfully perform the task with which they are charged: “the bigger the team, the harder it is to establish and enforce the rules of engagement” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 117). “Teaming” as a verb can really come to life through the course of the team’s work. Members begin to understand and self-govern each other on “how to interact” through the development of trust and deep knowledge of each other’s roles (Edmondson, 2012, p. 12). Once structures like norms are in place, they become all but invisible as teams begin to work interdependently on the tasks they have been assigned in alignment with the team’s unique purpose.

Collaborating in a spirit of mutual respect. This behavior is as much a mindset as it is a behavior on highly functional teams. While structures like norms (with repeated and persistent practice) help to set a foundation of mutual respect for teams, collaboration does not just magically occur though once a team comes together with a clear and compelling purpose. Teams need real resources and supports in order to enable interdependent collaboration. Even though leaders often recognize the importance of

investing resources and time into the front-line teams they lead within their organizational unit, many chief executives starve their leadership teams of the resources they need to be successful (Wageman et al., 2008). While ultimately “the mindset of teaming has to be focused on how to get the job done with the team resources available” (Edmondson 2012, p. xii), outstanding senior leadership teams (as compared with mediocre and poor teams) “do not skimp on support resources” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 141). Wageman et al. describe resources needed for effective teams in four categories:

- Material resources – like time, space, staff support, and mundane odds and ends – keep the basic needs of the team satisfied so that they can perform their work.
- Rewards – at the team level, not just the individual level – recognize and reinforce teams for delivering on their purpose or succeeding in their tasks. This includes the extent to which employees perceive that good team performance is recognized or rewarded in the organization.
- Education – including for the team leader – includes training and development not only on business unit functions but also on how to be an effective team member. This includes helping members to be able “to engage in robust but constructive debate with other team members and to think strategically about the enterprise as a whole” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 82). The authors claim that, second only to rewards, education about teamwork is the resource that made the most difference between outstanding teams and lower-performing teams.
- Information – relevant to the task the team must perform (including measures that allow members to assess their performance as a team) is a critical but often overlooked resource for teams. While some teams experience a dearth of data,

others suffer from information overload – often because they rely on the same information systems serving the rest of the organization, which were “built for other people and other purposes” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 147). Teams end up patching together their own understandings, “relying heavily on anecdotal information gathered informally through conversations that occur in the course of other work instead of systematic business intelligence” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 148).

It is important to underscore the challenges that teams face without systematically collected data for members to make meaning of through shared assessment, interpretation, and analysis. Edmondson (2012) even argues the learning work is not possible absent systematically collected data on both process (formative measures) and outcomes (summative measures) – both of which are key elements in organizational learning.

Experimentation and reflection. Experimentation and reflection, the third and fourth key behaviors of successful teams, critically recognize that “teaming involves a tentative, iterative approach to action that recognizes the novelty and uncertainty inherent in every interaction between individuals” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 52). Edmondson (2012) refers to action cycles as “trial and failure,” recognizing that “experimentation means expecting not to be right the first time” (p. 55). This may seem like a subtle shift in mindset, but the tacit expectation that employees will do right the first time runs deep in organizations. Whether expressed implicitly or explicitly, most individual team members – especially in the context of accountability – are highly reluctant to take risks that may result in failure, or to take a risk in speaking up when they recognize a failure is taking

place. Without failure and openly admitting to failure, an organization will not only deprive itself of lucrative opportunities to engage in the cycles of reflection and learning that lead to organizational improvement, but they will continue to inefficiently and ineffectively operate as they repeat (or even deepen) the same mistakes that yielded failures the first time around.

When teams take any significant action – including taking on new processes, or even tweaking existing processes – teams must actively engage in reflection to authentically understand whether or not the actions taken in experimentation actually worked. Reflection must be frequent and ongoing, “on a consistent basis that reflects the rhythm of the work,” in order to uncover learning for the team as a unit, as well as for the individuals composing the team to assess their own practice and contributions to the success or failure (Edmondson, 2012, p. 52). Reflection includes explicit and intentional surfacing and discussion of observations, questions, processes, and outcomes.

Edmondson emphasizes that the process of teaming in and of itself *is* learning: about the members of the team, about the task and purposes the team aspires to achieve, and about the context or environment in which the team exists. She calls the overarching orientation and mindset toward organizational learning “execution-as-learning,” reflecting an organizational or team-based commitment to learning by doing and (especially) learning through failure. Great performance, Edmondson (2012) claims, is “trying something that fails, figuring out what works instead, and telling your colleagues all about it – about both the success and the failure” (p. 28-29).

Having such a dogged persistence and attitude toward recognizing, acknowledging, and understanding failure reflects the commitment that Bryk and others

have postulated in the field of improvement science. Learning is characterized as collective and individual processes of gathering information, reflecting on it and assessing it, and modifying behaviors to produce desired outcomes as a result of that information. Execution-as-learning, thus, is “a way of operating as an organization that combines continuous learning with high performance...getting the work done while simultaneously working on how better to do it” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 30). As an organizational posture, its defining attribute is its “integration of constant, unremarkable, small-scale learning into day-to-day work,” as a sort of “reflection-in-action, rather than reflection-after-action” that is assimilated into the processes of doing the work itself (Edmondson, 2012, p. 30). Members of teams are constantly engaged in learning cycles actively during their practice, surfacing and making use of each member’s distinct knowledge and perspective to find ways to better deliver on their task and work better together.

Challenges to the learning imperative of teams. This friendly approach to failure is anything but automatic for most individuals and teams. As Edmondson (2012) points out, “it’s a cruel irony [that] our success depends on effective collaboration and learning, the essence of teaming, but these don’t come naturally either for individuals or the social systems we create;” she continues, “it can be hard for people to muster both the humility and the genuine curiosity that is needed to really learn from others” (p. 62). Failure is “emotionally unpleasant and can erode confidence,” and team members often wrap failure up in the self-worth they have for themselves or that the worth they perceive others (especially leaders) have for them (Edmondson, 2012, Ch. 5, Sec. “The Inevitability of Failure,” Para. 1).

Recognizing and analyzing failures requires persistent coaching and leadership, exercised not only by the team lead but by each member of the team as well, in order to continuously expand team capacity to identify and diagnosis problems. These behaviors take failures as grist to perform hard-lined introspection of the team as a unit: high-performing teams constantly assess and re-assess themselves to check on their interdependencies, purpose, and level of effectiveness. This introspection is aided through what Edmondson (2012) calls an inquiry orientation, a set of traits and behaviors needed for learning from failure that involves motivation “to embrace the difficult and often emotionally challenging lessons that failures reveal,” “a spirit of curiosity and openness,” “exceptional patience and a tolerance for ambiguity” (Ch. 5, Sec. “Developing a Learning Approach to Failure,” Para. 1), and unwavering belief in “our individual and collective fallibility” (Ch. 7, Sec. “Swimming Upstream,” Para. 1). While challenging to cultivate team-wide, these beliefs, mindsets, and practices have remarkable potential to unlock team learning – and limitless organizational growth – when they become instilled in teams.

This inquiry orientation can be quashed, however, in the presence of looming individual or team-based accountability or in the context of politicized and highly visible public agencies—these can cast a much more scornful light on mistakes and failure than is tenable for learning. It is a tricky dynamic to straddle: the need for accountability in public systems holding inordinate amounts of taxpayer money to create a public good (e.g. an informed citizenry), while also giving the space and safety for expert contributors holding diverse arrays of knowledge and expertise to figure out how best to come together to serve a vast, intricate web of student needs. Edmondson (2012) attempts to

straddle this dynamic in her discussion of psychological safety, a term she defines as “a climate in which people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings without fear of being penalized” (p. 77). She argues that, because teaming requires coordinating and integrating actions across complex tasks, teaming flourishes with psychological safety and diminishes without it. Psychological safety is built on the premise that “no one can perform perfectly in every situation when knowledge and best practice are moving targets” (Edmondson, 2008, p. 6).

In a visceral way, psychological safety is about team members feeling comfortable participating “without excessive concern about what others think of them” and having difficult conversations “without the need to tiptoe around the truth” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 77 and p. 118). Members of teams instinctively internalize the pain they feel when they are excoriated for doing something wrong, for overreacting, or for looking dumb in front of superiors or peers. The self-censorship or silence team members employ to cope with or obviate that pain can come with high cost to the function of the team or service to the team’s mission – even at the expense of human life, as Edmondson (2012) illustrated in the lead-up and aftermath of the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion. Team members choose to “stay silent not because they don’t have something to say” but because of a “subtle but pervasive fear of what others, particularly those in power, might think of them” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 119), thereby discounting the harm that could be caused to others or to the team in favor of our own self-preservation and self-protection from castigation. This type of fear can be exacerbated in the presence of strong accountability systems: admitting failure works directly contrary to the objectives of self-preservation and self-protection in this organizational environment.

Psychological safety is in essence a social contract within a team or organization; its presence can help determine whether or not individuals choose to believe or to act in the tiniest situations and decisions. Edmondson discusses a “tacit calculus” as the internal deliberation happening within an individual’s head, assessing the personal risk associated with a given interpersonal behavior before taking making a move, often effortlessly or automatically, at a “micro behavior decision point” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 119). She says it is staggering the “degree to which interpersonal fear can dominate modern work life and thwart the collaboration that is desperately needed” in knowledge-intensive organizations – which would include schools and education systems (2012, p. 117-8). That fear stunts risk-taking and the real learning that can come from trying, failing, and adapting. The problem is widespread and exacerbated especially in hierarchical organizations (like public bureaucracies) where control based on positionality is a primary mechanism for fulfillment of tasks or duties. Edmondson (2012) says the “most important reason to care about psychological safety in the workplace is that it encourages speaking up,” which helps facilitate learning behaviors such as discussing failure (p. 125). However, without a persistent focus on cultivating safety in culture, organizations and teams fall into what Edmondson (2008) thinks of as “predictable self-sabotaging traps,” including where “critical information and ideas fail to rise to the top” (the message is that “speed, efficiency, and results” are what matter, not “ideas, concerns, or even questions”); “people don’t have enough time to learn” (which “delays, discourages, or understaffs investments in areas where learning is critical” and can “subtly discourage technologies, skills, or practices that make new approaches viable”); and “companies think they can do no wrong” (falling prey to “a classic attribution error: the conclusion

that the company's success is evidence of its wisdom") (p. 4-6).

Especially considering how individual mindsets and behaviors are both influenced by psychological safety *and* help to fortify the psychological safety (no matter how low or high) that already exists, achieving this balance of the vulnerability of learning through taking personal risks in the context of hierarchy-based accountability is hard. It relies on a deeply personal understanding of self and role within an organization or team, which has implications for a team member's self-concept of identity and even value and worth toward the purpose that the team seeks to accomplish. Even in being selected to join a team "district leaders may signal not only that one's personal abilities and talents are valued but also that one is expected to represent the identity of other groups across the district," which further raises stakes of participation and pressure to ensure that a team member is adequately representing his or her constituency (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 8). This salience of role has the potential to be beneficial to team outcomes but can also be stifling to individual team members: if safety is lacking to enable all team members to freely speak up, especially on a team with a diversity of roles, then a team member may feel authorized only to speak on behalf of that particular role for which she is representative. For example, "being the only teacher on a senior leadership team is likely to raise the salience of that role identity for the team member and, in particular, her sense of responsibility to exercise voice on behalf of that constituency" (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 8).

As one last wrinkle, anyone who has ever done any teamwork is well aware that teams can easily and quickly decline in performance in the face of interpersonal conflict or miscommunication among team members. While collaboration has the potential to

enhance the quality a final product through the unique contributions of team members, these behaviors open up space for miscommunication and conflict – especially in knowledge sectors like education. Troubling dynamics are especially magnified in the context of accountability. Left unattended, team conflicts can lead to significant depths of distrust among team members that will ultimately hinder team performance and effectiveness.

4. How are Teams Called to Account for their Performance within the Context in which they Operate? | Team Accountability in the Context of Bureaucracy

*“...Consequently, the work of the team inevitably feels less important than the work of the individual members, and they wander away to focus on what they see as the most important of their accountabilities”
(Wageman et al., 2008, p. 61).*

Edmondson and Wageman et al. both argue that there is a clear role for accountability on teams. Edmondson (2012) states that holding people accountable helps people to understand that “unacceptable behaviors do occur and must be equitably addressed,” and that “clearly explaining what happened and why” helps a team and an organization to “build fairness and responsibility, which removes the fear of leader arbitrariness” (p. 144). This mindset is important in intentionally cultivating and maintaining teams in any environment, as it acknowledges that competent professionals may make mistakes while still maintaining low or no tolerance for reckless or careless behavior. That said, calling members of a team to account for their performance could undermine the very inquiry orientation that Edmondson and Wageman et al. both seek to advance in the spirit learning through failure. The messages of failure and learning (on the one hand) and consequences for or within teams for poor or lacking performance (on

the other) stand in tension with each other, and generally can confuse the members who compose teams. That tension is significantly exacerbated in the context of the hierarchy and bureaucracy that shape the American K-12 public education sector.

Accountability in the bureaucratic workplace has origins in what Edmondson (2008) described as a managerial model of control, in line with the factory work that characterized the early to mid-twentieth century. In this regime, the employee was simple and controllable, easily able to be directed to perform repetitive tasks largely without regard to the individual's personal motivation, interest, or pleasure (Edmondson, 2008). Absent from the logic of this model was the drive that might make a job bearable to an employee – or even motivate an employee. In the place of genuine employee interest were behavioral principles of control, combinations of carrots and sticks that taken together produce “an undercurrent of fear” that Edmondson (2008) reminds us still characterizes many workplaces today. Unfortunately, as Wilson (1989) wrote, “bureaucrats have preferences:” they have thoughts and opinions about the work they are doing and how the work should get done, and they also “have emotional commitment to the mission of the agency they serve that fuels their own self-interest” (p. 156).

As “citizens take a particularly dim view of initiatives undertaken by bureaucrats because they suspect civil servants of being self-serving or of pursuing their own idiosyncratic ideas of the public interest,” public managers like school district superintendents and principals tend to act like “administrators or bureaucrats rather than...entrepreneurs, leaders, or executives” (Moore, 1995, p. 19). In this mindset, public managers look downward “toward the reliable control of organizational operations rather than either outward, toward the achievement of valuable results, or upward, toward

renegotiated policy mandates” (Moore, 1995, p. 17). As a result, the very behavior that Edmondson lauds as key for teams to engage in to unlock successful performance – e.g. experimentation and reflection – is not much tolerated in bureaucratic settings. There is limited appetite for “imagination and initiative among (unelected) public sector executives;” such activity is instead viewed as “dangerous and contrary to the public interest” (Moore, 1995, p. 19). This squashes much enthusiasm for taking on risk or leaving room for error or mistake – let alone exploring innovations or improvements that could incrementally or dramatically improve efficiencies in operation.

A clear chain of command is impressed on workers in order to ensure safe and proper use of public resources toward ends of achieving public value. As Moore and Alonso (2014) put it, school systems have key leaders – like superintendents, principals, and others – who “as public managers and leaders [are] using collectively owned assets to achieve publicly defined goals;” they are responsible for “the fundamental task” and “a stock of public assets” to “do what they can to maximize the public value that can be produced from the skillful utilization of those assets” (p. 10). Holding the fiduciary responsibility to employ assets well in creating public value – in schools or elsewhere – is a prime reason why bureaucracy came to exist. Barzelay (1992) characterizes bureaucracy by describing roles that participants play in it in very specific terms: “Specific delegations of authority define each role in the executive branch. Officials carrying out any given role should act only when expressly permitted to do so either by rule or by instruction given by superior authorities in the chain of command” (p. 5). Bureaucrats take on very specific delegations and roles in line with the authority that has been provided to them, and their managers seek to command and control their

subordinates to not only ensure that value is produced from the resources being poured into the enterprise, but that public funds are held to the strictest standards of integrity in avoiding waste, fraud, and abuse.

Lest we think it only goes one way, the senior-most leaders of bureaucracies like school districts are “directly accountable up a bureaucratic chain of command to someone who has direct political authority over them,” exposing a vast hierarchy of vertical blame and accountability structures (Moore and Alonso, 2014, p. 16). Moore and Alonso (2014) call this a “cacophony of self-appointed ‘accountability agents,’ each having an interest in shaping the conduct and performance of the public schools, and believing they have a legal and moral right to demand accountability to them and their purpose as a member of the public” (p. 18). Navigating the choppy waters of such intensely political conversations about the processes and products intended to yield public value is arguably the most important aspect of the job of district leadership – or at the very least the most consequential. Beyond the central office, the environment can be even more rife with disagreement about the aims and objectives for the school system, including from: 1) leaders and teachers at schools who generate public value in the form of increased student opportunity and achievement; 2) city or community officials financing the operations of the district; 3) students and the parents and families they come from, who are both participants in the educational experience provided but also first-order beneficiaries of the value generated; and 4) other interested stakeholders around the city or community who are interested in the justice, opportunity, or economic advancement produced by a school district.

Because of how pernicious the effects of hierarchy up and down a system can be,

Wageman et al. (2008) point out that members of cross-functional teams have specific responsibilities that “keep them working as individuals, each representing a function or business unit and not the enterprise – and this structure is at the center of the problem” (p. 7). More highly interdependent tasks require team members to take action and make decisions on behalf of the entire organizational unit or organization and not just out of regard or perspective for their own business unit. It is hard, though, to make the teamwork feel at least as important to team members as their individual responsibilities. If chief executives do not give considerable thought to how they “create, structure, and support their top teams,” they may “thereby unintentionally [be] capping the potential of their teams’ contributions to the enterprise” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. XIII). To repeat a previous statement, absent this shared, compelling sense of purpose, team members will “wander away to focus on what they see as the most important of their accountabilities” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 61).

Legacy constraints on the aspirations of teaming. As discussed under my second question of the RKA, higher-level education agencies like those at the federal and state level can be powerful forces to drive change and crucial resources for districts with a diverse range of student needs. However, federal and state education agencies are largely frustrated by their lack of power at the classroom or student level, where implementation of instructional reforms are actually made.

Overall, Americans hold distaste for higher levels of government encroaching on the work of schools (which is traditionally considered extremely localized work), especially when it is perceived as trying to diminish or take away local determination of curriculum or instruction (Cohen and Spillane, 1992). Nonetheless, reform efforts from

state and federal governments require a similar degree of oversight and accountability that local leaders face in administering public programs. Each new program or initiative “had to be outfitted with its own minimum core of administrative operations (budget, personnel, evaluation, and the like)” within LEAs through which “to coordinate operations across many levels of government, owing to the lack of general administrative capacity above the local level” (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 9). In effect, leaders of each program had to establish their own systems to ensure proper implementation of funds and programs, which yielded “specialized administrative subunits” in every layer of education agency “organized around oversight tasks within each program” (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 9). While it came with the funding and hope that new programs provided, the authors argue that new programs come at a cost to administrative capacity of school systems, as they essentially divide up central offices to focus on oversight responsibilities for higher levels of government, rather than providing instructional support to meet the needs of whole children.

In effect, in exchange for the funding and support offered by state and federal education agencies, LEAs absorbed an overall weakening of central administrative capacity in supporting instruction. This occurred not only because of the stigma against federal and state programs becoming drivers of instruction, but also because more dollars were prioritized for compliance and oversight of these very programs. As LEAs continued to expand and develop alongside the intervening role of state and federal agencies, the needs for instructional support of schools were slowly overlooked: “the administrative expansion added little to central capacity in the core areas of education such as curriculum and instruction” (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 10). The end result was

(and largely continues to be) a massive bureaucracy driven more by compliance toward individual programs or initiatives (and the discrete elements or aspects of student identity or need they support) rather than by instructional needs – the latter of which districts are uniquely poised to tackle but which have not experienced the same urgency that compliance-driven units enjoy.

Rogers (1968) described the toll that compliance-driven fragmentation can have in the context of the New York City school system in the 1960s. Rogers calls the New York City Department of Education a “sick” bureaucracy, “a term for organizations whose traditions, structure, and operations subvert their stated missions and prevent any flexible accommodation to changing client demands” (1968, p. 267). As he states, “it has all those characteristics that every large bureaucratic organization has, but they have instituted and followed to such a degree that they no longer serve their original purpose” (1968, p. 267). This is important to note considering how much we ask school systems to do and the many masters they serve. These conditions lead to “vertical and horizontal fragmentation, isolating units from one another and limiting communication and coordination of functions,” “the consequent development of chauvinism within particular units, reflected in actions to protect and expand their power,” and “the exercise of strong, informal pressure from peers within units to conform to their codes, geared toward political protection and expansion and ignoring the organization’s wider goals” (1968, p. 267).

In an environment like what Rogers describes in New York City, teaming is easily undermined because organizational incentives are not vertically or horizontally aligned to get new work done. If tasks do not fit neatly into established silos, their probability for

success is vastly diminished. Resultantly, one could argue that the most important need in districts – instructional supports for teachers and schools – can fall through the cracks or by the wayside altogether. Wageman et al. (2008) describe how easily this plays out using an example from the life sciences industry: quoting the chief executive officer of a major industry player on the performance of his leadership team, “everybody came in and talked about their piece of the business. Really the only glue was the fact that I asked everyone to be there. Everyone was very cordial, but there was not a common goal. There was the attitude of, ‘things are okay as long as my area is okay’” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 80). In public education systems, with no clear lines of accountability, instructional support becomes a “good-to-have” rather than a “must-have,” at a significant cost to the public value the agency has actually sought out to generate (and at massive cost to the students experiencing the under-supported system).

Cohen and Spillane (1992) also make note that these fractures re-create themselves outside of LEAs in the external authorizing environment. “As policies and programs took shape, networks of interested agencies” like advocacy organizations, professional groups, and development and research agencies “grew up around them” (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 10). What is yielded then in the present day is a vast infrastructure built up around federal and state funding streams, reinforcing the stubborn persistence of these silos within LEAs and the hope that they represent for marginalized populations of students. These fragmented external entities then become part of the “cacophony of self-appointed ‘accountability agents’” that Moore and Alonso (2014) describe, each pursuing their own interest in influencing the priorities of the public schools and, resultantly, weakening overall administrative capacity to take a more holistic

view or approach to the needs of students and schools (p. 18).

Summary

While Wageman et al. put forward the three essential attributes for “real team” (stability, boundedness, and interdependence) and Edmondson put forward key behaviors to make teaming a reality in organizations (speaking up, collaborating in a spirit of mutual respect, experimenting, and reflecting), a host of mitigating factors can undermine the capacity for teams to persist once formed in public bureaucratic settings like school districts. School districts live with the legacy of programs and funding streams that have served to fragment central administrative capacity to support schools rather than unify it around evolved needs like instruction. This legacy makes it much harder for teams to intentionally engage in a limited number of consequential, challenging, and clearly interdependent tasks because of the competing demands and dueling accountabilities their composite members have. Add to it the ever-present specter of accountability in a hierarchical environment, and the learning behaviors necessary for teams to achieve and grow in their performance can be diminished or rooted out. The prevailing forces of compliance, both for higher-level government agencies as well as in interpersonal hierarchical relationships that exist across teams, can also contribute to the loss of focus on learning.

This does not mean effective teams or teaming is not possible in the context of the LEA, but that it becomes an extraordinarily difficult feat. Teams must overcome a vast ecosystem built up around these divisions and “political chasms,” as “the ingenious devices that cope with fragmentation among governments tend to exacerbate fragmentation within them” (Cohen and Spillane, 1992, p. 10). Leaders within and

outside of LEAs seek to better link incentives between policy and practice so that educators and schools can get what they need to dynamically achieve success for students – and really, to use teams cross-functionally to overcome the persistent barriers and roadblocks that districts have faced in the past in making difficult change and dealing with stubbornly low results. However, as eloquently summarized by Cohen and Spillane (1992), “the entire fragmented apparatus of American government weighs against such ventures” (p. 36).

Chapter 3: Theory of Action and Evidence

From the point of view of leadership, the work of strategy in a public school district is a balance of juggling the long-term initiatives that are assigned priorities along with the day-to-day crises and fires that demand leaders' time. The response to all of these stimuli, regardless of or in fulfillment of the intention of district leaders, ends up being a district's strategy, i.e. whatever Boston Public Schools (BPS) chooses to act on is implicitly our strategy and a statement of belief of what is the most important investment of our limited resources of people, time, and funding. Argyris (1996) refers to this as theory in use, or the mental map and model of organizational strategy that an organization implicitly ascribes to, through tacit structures, assumptions, and statements of priorities through actions taken. The theory in use is far larger than the actions toward which we aspire in our Strategic Implementation Plan: it is a sum total of what the district does.

My work on the ASSET team at BPS has focused on both of these dueling strands of long-term and immediate priorities by fostering collaboration and learning to more fully render visible and discussable how we are operating organizationally in support of our long-term and day-to-day goals. I concluded early on in my residency that it would be very challenging or nearly impossible to perform the narrow mandate (i.e. what I was brought on to BPS to do around our long-term instructional strategy) without also performing the broader mandate (i.e. gaining a thorough understanding of the context and environment, and pushing forward the teaming and organizational learning work). Using a brief review of the teaming literature, I developed a theory of action that reflects both. It is meant to synthesize key aspects of the learning from the RKA and blend together the

tasks I perform in my real, lived experience in residency. Because it lists “if” and “then” statements from both my narrow and broad mandate, the theory attempts to depict my best thinking about causes and effects while more broadly reflecting the vast and complex organizational environment to which I contribute at BPS. In essence, I attempted to coach both on the substance and the implementation of strategic projects, as well as to develop the team into becoming a collective actor.

Table 3.1:

Personal Theory of Action for Residency Year

Reference: Academics & Student Supports for Equity Team (ASSET) leadership team = 1 Deputy Superintendent + 5 Assistant Superintendents + 1 Special Projects Director + 1 Data Analyst + 1 Instructional Strategy Director (Ed.L.D. resident)

Introductory statement of belief: I believe in execution-as-learning, i.e. in “the integration of constant, unremarkable, small-scale learning into day-to-day work” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 31). As an organization, neither BPS nor ASSET will fundamentally change the way we perform our mission without dogged, persistent attention to and reflection on what and how we are performing as teams (e.g. developing a team with a clear purpose, examining the impact we are creating or not creating as a team) within the broader BPS environment.

If I:

The Purpose

- 1) Facilitate teams in developing a shared understanding of what instructional improvement looks like for the district and the way that the ASSET team fits into it; and

The Task

- 2) Partner with each member of the ASSET leadership team on the planning, execution, measurement, and support of implementation of each component of the Strategic Implementation Plan; and
- 3) Foster and facilitate collaboration among the ASSET leadership team to focus on successful performance of tasks that recognize, deepen, or expand interdependence and cross-functional learning; and

The Team

- 4) Grow and sustain a real team of mutual challenge, respect, and understanding within the ASSET leadership team, including coaching the team to better govern and manage itself in service of building capacity to manage a stream of strategically important projects, initiatives, and innovations; and
- 5) Lead the team in intentional learning cycles (formally and informally) about the work itself and how we as a team are performing or failing at it

Then: the ASSET leadership team will achieve its School Year 2016-17 milestones in initiatives 1.1-1.7 of the Strategic Implementation Plan and will be better prepared and poised to perform long-term, interdependent, strategic work in the years ahead.

In Table 3.1 below, I move from theory to reality by stating select examples of the leadership actions I performed during my residency year in line with the “if” statements I lay out in my personal, strategic theory of action. I include only a handful of indicators for each “if” statements as illustrative examples only: while these examples feel most salient to me in my current reflection on my time at BPS, the list is not exhaustive and does not capture the entirety of my work.

Table 3.2

Selected Evidence/Actions Demonstrating Leadership in Alignment with Personal Theory of Action for Residency Year at BPS

“If” Statement	Selected Evidence of Leadership
1) Facilitate teams in developing a shared understanding of what instructional improvement looks like for the district and the way that the ASSET team fits into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held ASSET leadership team and cross-functional team meetings in which we explicitly discussed and specified a shared vision for good teaching and learning in the district, identifying and leaning into areas of tension and disagreement • Routinely asked questions – as both facilitator of and participant in meetings – as to whether or not we have a shared understanding of topic at hand (“Are you sure we have a shared understanding of [blank]?”) • Facilitated and participated in instructional walks with team members from ASSET, as well as other central office teams and offices, to surface areas of agreement or disagreement in identifying good instructional practice • Engaged in mental modeling exercises within the context of ASSET team meetings and other team meetings, explicitly drawing out chains of logic to help us to better understand how we believed inputs and activities would yield outputs, outcomes, and impacts

<p>2) Partner with each member of the ASSET leadership team on the planning, execution, measurement, and support of implementation of each component of the Strategic Implementation Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coached assistant superintendents and their leadership and staff to create and follow detailed action plans via a template, series of meetings, and consultative check-ins • Checked in with team and project leaders at least monthly on the status of strategic initiatives and accomplishment of milestones, including review of formative (e.g. process, input) data around implementation as well as review of emerging evidence of success (e.g. chronic absenteeism) • Assisted team members with implementation of high-profile projects, contributing where additional or specialized capacity is needed • Designed guidance for, refined, and facilitated regular use of a dashboard for Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the ASSET team, providing explicit direction on the what, why, and how to collect and use KPIs, and used the dashboard to drive discussion on strategic performance management
<p>3) Foster and facilitate collaboration among the ASSET leadership team to focus on successful performance of tasks that recognize, deepen, or expand interdependence and cross-functional learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convened, set agendas, and ran weekly two-hour strategy meetings with ASSET leadership team, with rotating series of meeting topics (SIP improvement cycles, school and classroom instructional walks, monthly coordination of district-wide networked Teaching and Learning Team structure, and data dialogues) where we engaged both in coordination, exchange of strategic information, and decision-making as a team toward strategic projects (see full list of ASSET team structures in Appendix C) • Facilitated cross-functional learning time across members of the team, designing agendas to foster participation, contributions, and productive conflict from members over their views on instruction, direction of strategic projects, and overall getting to know each member's functional area • Called additional meetings (or focused standing meetings) to narrow team attention onto truly strategic projects that deepen interdependence, structuring conversation to draw out intersection points and assigning follow-up to continue to expand deliberately interdependent actions • Executed After-Action Reviews (AARs) following high-priority projects for the ASSET team or with other teams
<p>4) Grow and sustain a real team of mutual challenge, respect, and understanding within the ASSET leadership team, including</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitated meetings and retreats for the ASSET team with intentional structure for forming, storming, and norming as a collection of individuals and identities • Named and reinforced norms at each team meeting, including designating a norms checker to assess and monitor individual participation • Spent quality time socially with ASSET team members outside of work to build deep, interpersonal relationships with each other

coaching the team to better govern and manage itself in service of building capacity to manage a stream of strategically important projects, initiatives, and innovations	<p>on topics beyond education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honored the bounded nature of our team by firmly restricting it to the nine core team members on it and ensuring attendance in advance (e.g. not holding team meetings with several members absent; having stipulations about sending substitutions) • Served as connective tissue to help team members work through interpersonal conflict with each other, providing counsel to team members when they approached me in confidence with conflicts, and intentionally grouping team members for collaborative assignments in structures for productive struggle • Provided opportunities for developing empathy and perspective-taking among team members on ASSET team and across other teams (particularly around areas of tension) in order to push team members to better understand each other's perspectives and add humanity and identity to what feels like fractured work talk
5) Lead the team in intentional, formal, and informal learning cycles about the work itself and how we as a team are performing or failing at it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified and elevated high-leverage opportunities for interdependence, calling out and lingering on tasks that truly require real team essentials (interdependence, boundedness, stability) to successfully bring them to fruition • Surfaced and addressed mistakes and failures made by me or calling out other team members to model an environment of acceptance of performance deficiency for the sake of learning • Delivered frequent and candid feedback to team members, including my superiors, in the spirit of improving the overall work product • Facilitate Before-, Mid-, and After-Action Reviews for the team to heighten metacognitive awareness of intentional team actions and think critically about the way they individually or collectively showed up (or failed to show up) in executing a task

In looking across all five “if” statements and the accompanying actions I laid out, I feel like I demonstrated substantial but nonetheless limited progress in my work over the course of my residency year. In general, I feel like I have less tangible evidence of my work than I would desire, which I think is due at least in part to the very relational components of it. What tangible products do exist come in the form largely of project management deliverables, including action planning templates, a progress monitoring dashboard for team leadership, a separate progress monitoring dashboard of Key Performance Indicators on which the team can reflect, and myriad infrastructure

frameworks for meetings and team engagement (e.g. agenda templates, norms, consistent reporting out of notes and deliverables, etc.). As a colleague from outside of BPS jokingly likes to introduce me, “Mary’s an Ed.L.D. resident. She writes things on charts and creates meeting agendas” (Personal communication, M. Wall, November 2016).¹

Much of the work that I produced came through careful reading and reflection of the dynamics I inherited on the team on which I was placed. Piecing together perspectives from a variety of viewpoints (e.g. individual one-on-ones with team members, debriefs from meetings with one or more team members, soliciting feedback on structure and assignments), I tried earnestly to meet the team where it was, build up the foundation that had been laid (interpersonally and related to the work), and focus our team efforts on tasks that truly would drive interdependence. ASSET team members mostly were responsive to the interventions I provided: they showed up to meetings and were mostly engaged and present during them; they completed a good deal of the pre-assignments or follow-up from those meetings (with some variation and inconsistency); and they reflected on progress and performance at least monthly.

While certainly not a statement of impact on schools in terms of changed educator practices or student achievement, the team has made a great deal of progress toward the long-term instructional strategic projects that it set out to perform this year. As of the end of February 2017, of the 51 milestones that fall under ASSET’s purview in the Plan’s initiatives 1.1 - 1.7, thirteen are completed or mostly completed, with another twenty-five well underway in progress toward their original or revised completion dates within the

¹ For confidentiality, I have largely omitted names or identifying characteristics for quotations in the capstone, with the exceptions of those who are unable to be anonymized (e.g. the Superintendent).

2016-17 School Year. Several deadlines had to be revised to provide additional time, but these revisions have occurred through processes and structures I set up and facilitated with the team to discuss performance and come to realistic expectations for success (see Appendix C for ASSET meeting structures). Timelines were modified for the sake of getting to a stronger overall product in the end, as well as in reflection of the day-to-day operational and support demands that often derail best intentions in long-term work. Of the remaining thirteen initiatives for which I do not yet have indicators of progress, nearly all are still in ramp-up stages as of this writing, as their deadlines are not approaching until later in the School Year.

While these designations are wholly subjective and determined through my own assessment of the work discussed and the tangible products demonstrated, this type of formal progress monitoring using any (subjective or objective) indicators is largely new for the team. It requires a mix of project management in understanding what initiative needs attention with the day-to-day exigencies that naturally arise and take the work off course. I believe that keeping a concerted eye on progress – and holding individuals and teams to account through frequent, structured performance dialogues – has had a net positive impact on the forward motion of the work.²

Surveys Exploring the Effectiveness of Teams

Background and methods. In February 2017, I initiated several formal data collections to obtain some rough, point-in-time indicators of team effectiveness at BPS.

² I am intentionally omitting any mention of outcome or impact on student-level learning outcomes or even instructional practice from the new supports and resources provided by ASSET for school instruction or operations, as it fell outside of the scope of my inquiry and is extremely premature to reliably make determinations of effect on educator performance or student achievement.

The three inquiry lines I used to drive this data collection are derived from Wageman et al.'s (2005) criteria for team effectiveness, a three-dimensional concept reflecting the quality of the team's work and the level of satisfaction that consumers experienced with it, as well as how well the team members enhanced their ability to work together as a team in the future and how much individual team members learning enhanced their wellbeing. I adapted data collection instruments to address each of these criteria. Table 3.3 presents these lines of inquiry and the data collection instruments I used to pursue them.

Table 3.3:

Survey data collection for illustrative exploration of team effectiveness

Criteria of team effectiveness (Wageman et al., 2005)	Data collection instrument
1) Whether the performance of the team met or exceeded standards of the "people, both inside and outside the organization, most affected by the team's work;"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Leader Support Survey, an original tool adapted from University of Washington (2013) on support offered by central office teams and level of support experienced; administered to school leaders • Informal interviews and discussions with central office leaders
2) "How well members worked together now to enhance – rather than undermine – their capability to work together in the future;" and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) on team capacity, perceptions of performance, and experiences of individuals, from Wageman et al. (2005), with an added section from Edmondson (1999) on psychological safety; administered to a small selection of BPS central office teams • Informal interviews and discussions with BPS central office team members
3) "Whether the group experience, on balance, contributed positively to the learning and personal development of individual team members." (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 10-11).	

For criterion 1, I primarily surveyed school leaders (as primary consumers of central office resources and supports in the BPS system) to assess whether or not they were satisfied with the support they were receiving from central office teams. The survey of school leaders did not zero in on one specific team to gauge satisfaction. This was an intentional choice on my part, as I did not believe school leaders would by and large be able to distinguish which specific supports were products exclusively of any specific team. Nonetheless, I did ask on the survey if any specific teams were particularly helpful to them in their work.

For criteria 2 and 3, I employed Wageman, Hackman, and Lehman's Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) (2005) and added a section from an Edmondson (1999) survey on psychological safety. As an instrument intended to help with understanding and "practical diagnosis" of team strengths and weaknesses, the TDS presents a "conceptual model of the factors that research has shown to be most consequential for team effectiveness...to assess any type of work team that operates in an organizational context" (p. 375). As suggested by Wageman et al. (2005), the framework generates a "diagnostic profile that can help team members and leaders learn about the conditions that foster team effectiveness even as they explore the standing of their own team on those factors" (p. 375). While I cannot necessarily make reliable, industry- or sector-wide comparisons to each one of the dimensions surveyed, looking at results between various teams within an organization or even just looking to see relative scale strength can still be a helpful diagnostic data point in team improvement efforts. In the added section from Edmondson (1999) on psychological safety, I could not reliably yield composite scores like on dimensions from the TDS. Nevertheless, I did calculate answer averages to get a

sense of the presence or absence of psychological safety in this specific team environment.

Before presenting the survey data, it should be noted that the descriptive data I obtained is preliminary, and to some extent, inconclusive. While the cross-sectional data collected is limited in its scope and conclusiveness, I believe the mixed methods approach still sheds some thoughtful light on the diagnosis of the current state of team performance as of February 2017 and provides some points of prognosis for future action and implications of teams at BPS in the future. There was only one round of data collection, so I was unable to analyze performance before or after any interventions or suggest any trends. My intention was not to quantify the impacts of my leadership moves on the team. Instead, the data is meant to provide an illustrative, point-in-time snapshot of whether or not school leaders say they feel supported, and whether or not those providing the support feel like individually or as a group they are building capacity to deliver further supports in the future.

Results: quality of and satisfaction with work products. Table 3.4 lays out the data collected on criteria 1 for team effectiveness, focusing on whether or not the work products produced were considered satisfactory either to the people consuming them or those evaluating or leading the work. Overall, 26 of 125 BPS school leaders responded to the voluntary survey, or a 21% response rate, over the course of 3 weeks in February through March 2017. Though this rate seems low, it still merited inclusion here for illustrative purposes among school leaders in the BPS system.

Table 3.4:

Results from School Leader Support Survey (n = 26)

Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate
 “Support” in the survey referred to services, resources, tools, professional learning/development, capacity, and/or other aid to schools as provided formally or informally by individuals or teams at the BPS central office. For the purposes of the survey, school leaders were asked to think about their context as the day-to-day leadership of their schools.

Item	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I feel supported by central office.	1	4	2.85	0.88
2. I feel supported by specific individuals within central office.	3	5	4.54	0.71
3. I feel supported by specific teams within central office.	2	5	4.08	0.89
4. I feel supported by my Teaching and Learning Team (TLT) (i.e. central office staff and/or my peer school leaders in my TLT).	1	5	3.46	1.27
5. The support I receive from central office is of high quality.	1	4	3.19	0.9
6. The support I receive from central office is useful and relevant to my practice.	1	5	3.08	0.93
7. The support I receive from central office is aligned to my own needs and/or learning.	1	4	2.69	0.88
8. The support I receive from central office is sufficient in addressing the needs of my school.	1	4	2.5	0.99
9. The support offered by central office is accessible to me.	1	4	2.85	0.97
10. The support offered by central office is accessible to all school leaders.	1	4	2.6	0.96
11. I make use of supports offered by central office to strengthen or improve instruction.	1	5	3.15	1.08
12. I share the same values as central office in improving instruction and/or performance.	1	5	3.62	0.98
13. I understand what priorities and/or goals central office has in improving instruction and/or performance.	1	5	3.15	1.35
14. I share central office's priorities and/or goals in improving instruction and/or performance across the district.	1	5	3.52	1.16
15. Central office shares my priorities and/or goals in improving instruction and/or performance in my school.	1	4	2.8	0.96
16. It is clear how central office supports are designed to improve instructional practice	1	4	2.46	0.99

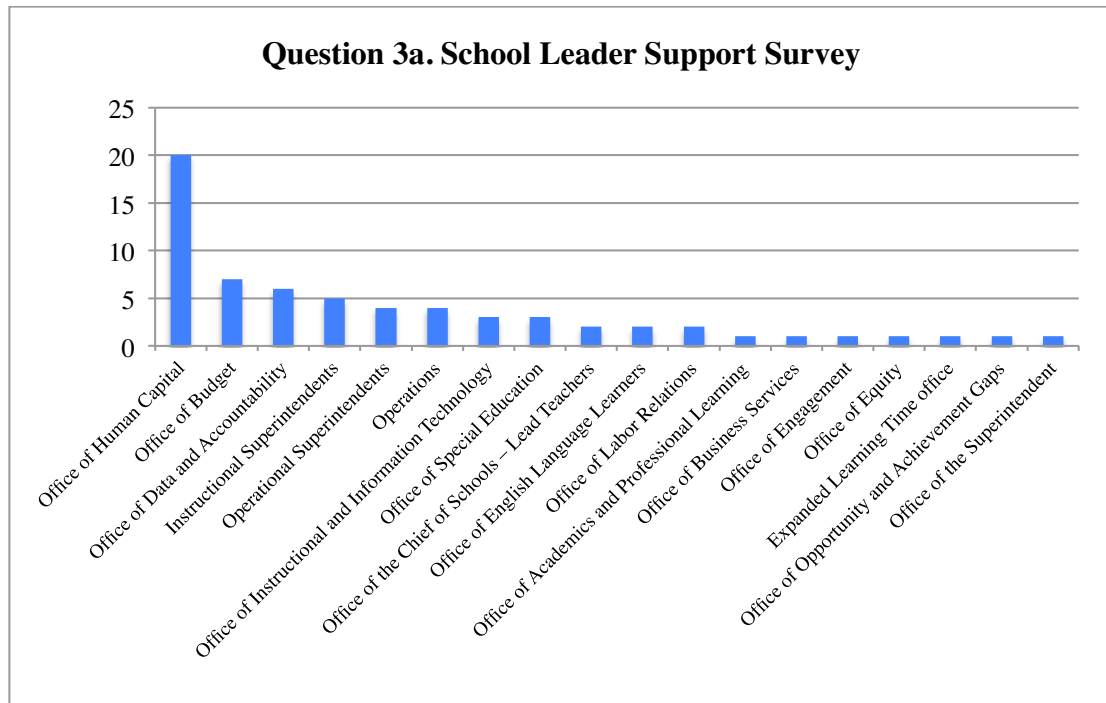
and/or performance at schools.				
17. The majority of individuals and/or teams at central office are “on the same page” in the kind of support they provide to schools.	1	4	2.12	1.11
18. The majority of individuals and/or teams at central office are “on the same page” in how they provide support to schools.	1	4	1.88	1.01
19. Overall, I am satisfied with the level/amount of support I receive from central office.	1	4	2.73	1
20. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of support I receive from central office.	1	4	2.77	1.03

The survey additionally asked three open response questions. After answering a scaled question on the item, “I feel supported by specific teams within central office,” respondents were asked: “Which teams?” Their responses are reflected in Figure 3.1 below:

Figure 3.1

Number of Responses by Office, Question 3a, School Leader Support Survey (n = 26)

After answering a scaled question on the item, “I feel supported by specific teams within central office,” respondents were asked: “Which teams?” Their responses were:



As a second open response question, after answering a scaled question on the item, “I make use of supports offered by central office to strengthen or improve instruction,” respondents were asked: “Why/why not?” Their responses included (organized by theme below):

- Personal network:
 - “I leverage the expertise of specific individuals with whom I’ve built relationships and about whom I know their specific skill sets. The help I am able to secure for the benefit of my school community is more grounded in the effectiveness of my personal network than in institutional structures.”
 - “Supports offer useful strategies, skills, although I often have to tailor them myself to suit my school context.”
 - “Depends on the department.”

- Availability of staff at central office:
 - “All central offices should have staff available as long as schools are open. Principals should have a line to call for every office that gets answered.”
 - “When I don't it's because I can't get in touch with the people I need to be in communication with.”
- Dearth of expertise or practical know-how:
 - “There is little expertise in the areas that I need support.”
 - “Seems pointless to request help that can't or won't be delivered”
 - “Some departments are too bureaucratic and have no idea how schools work.”

Finally, an optional open-ended prompt appeared as the last item on the survey.

While the responses varied thematically, a sample of them appears below (organized by theme):

- Variability by office:
 - “This survey is challenging because my experience varies widely across departments and individuals, which is why so many responses veered toward the center.”
 - “Central office support is uneven – some teams are very responsive and very helpful, others less so.”
- Opacity of priorities or roles within central office:
 - “I don't know what central office's priorities or goals are. I know what we espouse as a district (in terms of our current focus on [culturally and linguistically sustaining practices]). I do not see us live that across

departments and individuals. I wonder how many folks at central office know what our current priorities and goals are AND how they fit into those goals.”

- “I’m not even sure if some departments exist anymore, or if they do, what is reasonable to expect from them.”
- Need for more support:
 - “We need the people from central to come to the schools and give the school hands-on support. . . . There hasn’t been anyone who has come to our school to support teachers. Perhaps I am not clear about the model that is being ‘deployed.’”
 - “Schools are routinely being put in the position of having to make choices that are impossible and then are blamed for them regardless of what the decision is. [Staff] are poorly supported and are given the runaround when they ask reasonable questions.”
- Disorganization within central office:
 - “It often seems like departments are not communicating about due dates, timelines, and asks of school leaders. Often we will have a number of deadlines that at the same time, particularly around eval and budget season. The central office should keep a master calendar of deadlines for school leaders so that reports and deadlines can be reasonably spaced out.”
 - “Central office staff needs to return emails and/or answer phone calls. Very frustrating to call a department...and not get a response, a reply, or a solution to a problem.”

- “It is a challenge to get questions answered. Often conflicting information is given by different people in response to the same question. . . . Multiple similar questions from different people are heard as a pile on instead of understood as a natural consequence of not providing answers the first time a question is asked.”

See full text of open-answer survey questions in Appendix E.

Results: team capacity and individual wellbeing and learning. Table 3.6 shows the data collected on criteria 2 and 3 of team effectiveness through administration of the Teaming Diagnostic Survey (with psychological safety addendum) which, respectively, seek to describe how well members worked together now to enhance their capability to work together in the future and whether the team experience contributed positively to the learning and personal development of individual team members (Wageman et al., 2008). The targeted subject of this survey was the ASSET leadership team, which consists of 9 individuals (see Figure 1.2 or Appendix D for an organizational chart). Of the 9 team members, 8 responded to the survey, or an 89% response rate, over the course of 2 weeks in February 2017. In the table below, scale ranges are listed prior to the survey items to which they refer.

Table 3.6

Results from the modified Team Diagnostic Survey of the ASSET Leadership Team (n = 8)

Section	Topic/Item	Description (<i>including illustrative text from survey items</i>)	Composite Score Mean
1	Real team <i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Bounded	It is clear who all the members of the team are.	3.71
	Stable	Team membership is stable over	4.31

	Interdependent	time. Team members have to depend heavily on one another to get the team's work done.	3.96
2	Compelling Direction/Purpose <i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Clear	Team's purposes are specified so clearly that all members know exactly what this team exists to accomplish.	2.88
	Challenging	Team's purposes are so challenging that members have to stretch to accomplish them.	3.88
	Consequential	Team's purposes are of great consequence for those served.	3.63
	Ends and Means?	Do team members specify the team's purposes? Do team members specify the means by which the purposes are pursued?	Neither the purposes nor the means are specified by others for our team.
3	Enabling Structure <i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	<u>Composition</u>		
	Size	Team is just the right size to accomplish its purposes.	4.25
	Diversity	Team has a nearly ideal "mix" of members, who bring different perspectives and experiences to the work.	4.19
	Skills	Team members have the talent and experience (including teamwork skills) for the kind of work that we do.	3.50
	<u>Task design</u>		
	Whole task	The team performs a whole, identifiable, meaningful piece of work.	3.33
	Autonomy/Judgment	The team's work leaves room for the exercise of judgment or initiative.	3.63
	Knowledge of Results	Carrying out our team's work generates trustworthy indicators of how well we are doing.	3.13
	<u>Acceptable team behaviors</u>		

	Norms	It is clear what is – and what is not – acceptable member behavior in this team.	2.92
4	Supportive Organizational Context <i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Rewards/Recognition	Excellent team performance pays off in this organization.	2.13
	Information	Teams in this organization can get whatever information they need to plan their work.	3.08
	Education/Consultation	Teams in this organization receive adequate training for the work that they do.	3.00
	Material Resources	Teams in this organization readily obtain all the material resources they need for their work.	3.00
5	Coaching <u>Team leader coaching</u> <i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Coaching Availability	Teams have access to “coaches” who can help them learn from their successes and mistakes.	2.58
	Focus of Leader's Attention	Among coaching individuals, helping team members work together, getting the team set up right, and running external interference, which is the team leader's biggest priority?	Coaching individual team members
	Helpfulness of team leader coaching	Team leader is helpful in building team's capabilities.	3.38
	<i>Scale: 1 = never, 4 = often</i>		
	Task-focused coaching	Extent to which team leader focuses on building commitment to and implementing task	2.77
	Operant coaching	Extent to which team leader provides appropriate feedback	2.96
	Interpersonal coaching	Extent to which team leader coaching helps resolve interpersonal conflicts	2.31
	Unhelpful directives	Extent to which team leader micromanages or provides inappropriate direction	2.63
	<i>Scale: 1 = least favorable 5 = most favorable</i>		
	Summary indicator of	Summary indicator all of the above	3.03

	team leader helpfulness	team leader measures	
	<u>Peer coaching</u>		
	<i>Scale: 1 = never, 4 = often</i>		
	Task-focused peer coaching	Extent to which team members promote shared commitment and motivation	2.46
	Interpersonal peer coaching	Extent to which team members resolve conflicts amongst each other	2.13
	Unhelpful peer interventions	Extent to which team members tell other team members what to do	2.50
6	Team Processes for Effectiveness		
	<i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Effort	Team demonstrates their commitment to our team by putting in extra time and effort to help it succeed.	3.83
	Strategy	Team members come up with innovative ways of proceeding with the work	3.50
	Knowledge and skill	Team members actively share their knowledge and expertise and accept ideas based on that.	3.04
7	Psychological Safety		
	<i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Efficacy	Team members believe the team's goals are within their reach.	3.38
	Psychological safety	Team members act without excessive concern about what others think of them or without the need to tiptoe around the truth.	3.54
	Learning behaviors	Team members take time to diagnose and learn about the team's performance.	3.06
8	Interpersonal Processes		
	<i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Quality of team interactions	Working together energizes and uplifts members of our team.	3.63
	Satisfaction with team relationships	Team members enjoy talking and working with each other as well as getting to know each other.	4.25
9	Individual Wellbeing and Learning		
	<i>Scale: 1 = statement is highly inaccurate; 5 = statement is highly accurate</i>		
	Internal work	Team members feel personal	4.00

motivation	satisfaction when the team does well.	
Satisfaction with growth opportunities	Team members feel like they learn and grow from their work on this team.	4.08
General satisfaction	Team members enjoy the work they perform as a team and feel satisfied overall with the team experience.	3.63

Additionally, short answer text boxes were available in each section of the survey to relay additional thoughts beyond the scaled questions. While only a few respondents provided short answers, their responses appear below:

- “If I don't always feel a part of the team, it was sometimes too difficult to make a choice on the Likert scale for other responses, which in itself seems telling.”
- “I really found myself struggling in answering the whole team questions, because sometimes I feel that way about my peers but it doesn't always feel I'm on the same page with the team leader. Some responses went up or down in number because of this disconnect.”
- “We know who is on the team. I am pretty sure that the field does not know/care about the ASSET team as a unit. We are still approached as individual departments.”
- “Team is learning to work together. All are talented and all have much to learn from each other.”
- “Team is learning each other's assets and skills.”
- “I appreciate all of the team members and what they all teach me through this experience. We do not always get along with everyone immediately and this will

take time. I appreciate this taking time, however, I wish there was more intentional guidance in how we operate as a team.”

- “I feel like these scores are not reflective of how invaluable I find my time on this team.”

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, I have separated discussion into two sections that likely suggest a false distinction. The first section – findings – covers the insights I have drawn at the team level for the performance of teams within the Boston Public School (BPS) system, largely drawing from the teaming survey data reported in Chapter 3. In the subsequent section, I zoom out to think about what in the system might be causing teams to experience certain challenges or successes. In reality there is a great deal of overlap between these two domains; nonetheless, I am hoping the findings and analysis will be useful for the sake of diving deeper into diagnosing team performance and the way it has or lacks potential for making impact in the broader BPS system environment. While I cannot and do not explain every phenomenon I witnessed over a ten-month span, I hope to shed light on some of the lived experiences I have shared with a variety of teams and team members in the past year at BPS.

In both sections, my insights are based on my own observations as well as the observations of colleagues and peers on and off my team within BPS. I reiterate an important caveat up front that my findings are incredibly limited and by no means conclusive. I present a necessarily incomplete and biased account that could not possibly represent the fullness of the experience from every leadership level and position within the organization. I still hope my analysis can serve as fodder for greater organizational reflection and discussion on the use of teams in tackling strategic change initiatives.

Team-Level Findings

Criteria 1: Satisfaction with product from internal authorizers and external consumers. In trying to render an overall impression of whether or not teams met or

exceeded standards of the people outside the organization who are affected by and consume teams' works, the survey data is decidedly mixed; only a select few teams have demonstrated consistently high performance. What lies in between the extremes represented in the data varies, mostly on the lower end of performance (according to a limited number of respondents) with impressions reflecting less satisfaction with the supports they receive and a perception of disorganization, incongruence, and incoherence from the leaders in charge of providing support to schools.

On average in the sample ($n = 26$), respondents report lower feelings of supportedness ($\bar{x} = 2.85$) and lower overall satisfaction with amount ($\bar{x} = 2.73$) and quality ($\bar{x} = 2.77$) of central office support than they do when they describe feelings of support from individuals ($\bar{x} = 4.54$) and from teams ($\bar{x} = 4.08$). There persists a good deal of confusion on how the supports and resources that central office teams provide fit together into one large coherent picture of improvement of instruction or performance. Respondents believed it was not just their inability in understanding it from the outside, but instead that central office individuals and teams are incoherent and lack shared understanding of how the support they provide comes together around schools. The lowest scores on the survey pertained to whether the majority of individuals and/or teams at central office are "on the same page" in the kind of support they provide to schools ($\bar{x} = 2.12$) and how they provide that support ($\bar{x} = 1.88$). School leaders did not uniformly see how central office supports came together ($\bar{x} = 2.46$), and the greatest amount of variation in response to question came with whether or not school leaders claimed to understand what priorities or goals central office has in improving instruction and/or performance ($\sigma = 1.35$).

These responses were largely corroborated in the short-answer responses as well. In the survey, respondents overwhelmingly praised one team – the Office of Human Capital – which far and away received the highest praise in the open response question, followed by the budget office in faraway second place. (This also coincides with the time of the year when both of these offices are in highest demand.) Beyond that, respondents indicated that performance varies widely by individual and by team. Respondents indicated that school leaders with social capital and relationships seem to get what they needed, but that otherwise they felt like the level of support was inconsistent or varied. It is worth noting that ASSET (as a division of BPS) was not named in any of the team discussions. While some of the offices that compose ASSET (e.g. Academics and Professional Learning, English Learners, Special Education) were mentioned, their mentions were neither consistently positive nor negative in tone.

It is also worth noting that there is a weak distinction in the minds of external consumers about what the distinction is between “teams” and “offices” within central office. I intentionally used the term “team” in the survey and was largely met with responses mostly about capital-“O” Offices (which surely contain a great array of teams) or individuals. I argue that this communicates low operational understanding of the distinctions between what historically bureaucratic silos have produced (e.g. formal, capital “O” Offices) and which cross-functional teams (which by and large execute the reforms of the current leadership administration) are actually doing. The bureaucratic mindset seeks out a single point person or point office in order to get things done, but that does not always align with the espoused values of the district: as stated by a respondent of a separate school leader survey administered in late 2015, “the stated theory of action

is the ‘culture of we’ and support, but I have not experienced that culture in action from every department” (Boston Public Schools, 2015).

The pinch that bureaucratic accountability puts on teaming came through in the survey responses as well. One survey respondent pointed out, “Schools are routinely being put in the position of having to make choices that are impossible and then are blamed for them regardless of what the decision is.” This feeling of blame – across central office teams or Offices, or across schools – came up in several responses and illustrated both the keen need for leaders throughout the system (at schools and in central office) to identify which is most important in their personal accountabilities and to act on them. Without that clarity, respondents suggested that acting on one’s own accountabilities could come at the expense of others in the system. This pinch makes it difficult to want to zoom out and think more systematically. Because of fear of reproach, even with a persistent emphasis on teaming, it becomes difficult to zoom out to not only see but act on implications of one’s own actions or inactions in a large bureaucracy. This reluctance even comes through in the language we use to describe projects of strategic importance to the district. As some consultants to BPS pointed out in their synthesis of ethnographic research into the system, “BPS leaders tend to speak in terms of ‘initiatives’ rather than desired impact. In managing the complex and interconnected realities of this system, the initiative is the essential unit in getting work done. However, this way of describing their work makes it harder for leaders to gain a strategic view that cuts across their organization’s silos. And it makes it harder to communicate to their constituents the fundamental change they’re pursuing” (Agency, 2017).

Overall, among the clearest themes that emerged was the impression that central

office is not well organized or cohered when it comes to supporting schools. As expressed by one respondent, “Central office support is uneven – some teams are very responsive and very helpful, others less so. It often seems like departments are not communicating about due dates, timelines, and asks of school leaders.” To the end user and primary consumer of central office supports, the approach that central office (as a monolith) takes feels disorganized and chaotic. School leaders also suffer from the lack of clarity among roles in central office: “I think a ‘who to go to for what’ chart would be very helpful. Departments have changed their definitions and/or their names and it's unclear sometimes who to reach out to. . . . I am also unclear when my Superintendent wants to hear from me directly and about what kinds of issues.” To me, the data does not suggest the problems are insuperable – it is just that central office has not been thinking about them systematically, which comes through as piecemeal understanding to school leaders. Said one respondent in a 2015 iteration of a similar survey, “While there have been some changes in the spirit of interactions with central departments, the actual experience remains to some extent the same. This isn't because people in central are all miserable bureaucrats. Many are incredibly competent, solutions-oriented people. But we haven't yet created a streamlined way for principals to engage with the various departments” (Boston Public Schools, 2015).

Criteria 2 and 3: Building team capacity and individual wellbeing and learning. The data I collected through my modified Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) on the ASSET leadership team paints a complicated picture of team effectiveness. In some dimensions, the team's work shines and there are encouraging suggestions from the experience. In other dimensions, scaled survey responses helped to quantitatively

illustrate some of the frustrations that team members have personally shared with me. On the whole, conceptions of team effectiveness for ASSET leadership team seem decidedly mixed, and the ASSET leadership team emerges as still in development.

The TDS provides indexed scores across a variety of indicators, boiling down about 100 questions to about 40 indicators that provide a summary reflection of team performance. The domains in which the team rated itself highest were in many of the formal, structural domains of “real team:” team members reported feeling strongly the stability of team members ($\bar{x} = 4.31$), the right size of team ($\bar{x} = 4.25$), having the right mix of people ($\bar{x} = 4.19$), and the bounded nature of the team’s membership ($\bar{x} = 3.71$).

The team’s sense of purpose was less convincing. While team members recognized that interdependence is in fact an essential element of the work the team is charged with getting done and that they must depend heavily on each other to be successful ($\bar{x} = 3.96$), they were less clear in understanding exactly what their charge was. Even though the work of the team feels both consequential ($\bar{x} = 3.63$) and challenging ($\bar{x} = 3.88$) to team members, clarity – which Wageman et al. argue is the most important attribute of a compelling team purpose and direction – was perceived to a substantially lesser extent ($\bar{x} = 2.88$). This perceived lack of clarity manifested in task design as well, with responses toward the middle of the scale in team member assessment of whether they perform a whole, identifiable piece of work ($\bar{x} = 3.33$) and whether or not doing the work generates trustworthy indicators of the work’s results ($\bar{x} = 3.13$). On the latter, members were somewhat middle of the road in whether or not teams in this organization can get whatever information they need to plan their work ($\bar{x} = 3.08$). This communicates an overall lack of access to information about team performance that team

members can use to reliably understand or diagnose whether or not their overall performance is satisfactory or producing the results they seek to accomplish.

As reflected in the literature, “a lack of access to data on failures is the most important barrier to managers learning from them. . . . To overcome this barrier, organizational leaders must develop systems, procedures, and cultures that proactively identify failure” (Edmondson, 2012, Ch. 5, Sec. “Gather Data and Solicit Feedback,” Para. 1). These data systems are of especially high importance considering the way that we use teams at BPS to tackle some of our most seemingly intractable problems. While this approach to teamwork and purpose is laudable, these problems are by nature unwieldy and amorphous. Absent reliable indicators that efforts are leading anywhere, team members can easily become discouraged by a lack of progress or convinced that their contributions do not matter or are not working to make change in incredibly difficult pursuits.

Perhaps the most perplexing data to make sense of were the responses that members enjoyed the personal relationships they have developed on the team but experienced difficulty in addressing lingering interpersonal conflict amongst team members. These two dimensions, in fact, were amongst the highest and lowest (respectively) composite scores on the survey, with satisfaction of team relationships coming in at a whopping average of 4.25 and the extent to which team members resolve conflicts amongst each other coming in at a measly average of 2.13. Another low-scoring indicator on the survey further communicates this phenomenon: members are less sure about what behaviors are or are not acceptable on this team ($\bar{x} = 2.92$). Team member friction seems to be corroborated by the team’s assessment of its own self-governing and

coaching: members reported not only low levels of conflict resolution amongst themselves and from the team leader, but also in promoting and securing shared commitment and motivation in the work ($\bar{x} = 2.46$). On the whole, team members seem to laud their commitment and effort to making sure work succeeds ($\bar{x} = 3.83$) but struggle to figure out how the team itself fits together in this task environment.

Team members also report not feeling very supported as a team. The modal response among four options for the focus of the team leader's attention was coaching individual team members, rather than getting the team structured and running or performing external interference on the team's behalf. The absence of interpersonal conflict resolution comes through with the team leader as well, with respondents reporting lower frequency of team leader intervening in interpersonal conflicts ($\bar{x} = 2.31$) than of any other leader coaching behavior (operant coaching, $\bar{x} = 2.96$; task-focused coaching, $\bar{x} = 2.77$). Overall, respondents did not reflect feeling like team-based coaching was widely available ($\bar{x} = 2.58$).

In the last section of the survey, team members report relatively high degrees of personal satisfaction with the growth and learning they experience on the team ($\bar{x} = 4.08$) and satisfaction with high quality team performance ($\bar{x} = 4.00$), but when it comes to overall team satisfaction there is noticeably lower ($\bar{x} = 3.63$). I speculate that, between the lower degree of overall team satisfaction and the higher degree of perceived interpersonal conflict on the team, this presents an artificially high report of psychological safety on the team. Members self-report a relatively high average response across psychological safety questions ($\bar{x} = 3.54$) despite verbal admissions to me suggesting otherwise, particularly in the presence of the team leader. As expressed by one

respondent, “I really found myself struggling in answering the whole team questions, because sometimes I feel that way about my peers but it doesn't always feel I'm on the same page with the team leader. Some responses went up or down in number because of this disconnect.” These responses left me wondering: why does the unit itself – despite showing many healthy indicators – still feel “off”? Why – despite our satisfaction with each other as individuals – does the teamwork still feel like a chore?

Aiding in this lack of investment is the organizational context, which the ASSET team spoke resoundingly in stating that good team performance does not pay off in the BPS context ($\bar{x} = 2.13$). Abetted by the fact that each member of the team has a lot of work to do leading their own teams with their own accountabilities, why bother committing to a structure with such low degrees of collective return or reward when the rest of the system is set up mostly just to recognize individual successes?

Analyzing Team-Level Findings in the Context of System

“Teaming failure occurs due to a lack of inter-professional and inter-task awareness on the part of the professionals involved in the work. . . . Unless people are aware of their interdependence with others for accomplishing whole jobs, teaming cannot get underway” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 50).

In this section, I present major arguments analyzing the broader system in which teams operate at BPS, reflecting not only on the extent to which teams meet or do not meet what the teaming literature would say is needed for good performance, but also more broadly on the way that conditions in the system that help or hinder teaming from taking place. It is worth noting that the impact of many of the conditions I bring up are cumulative; while I represent them in a specific order in the following, the arguments are fairly intertwined throughout.

1. As a system, we do not share understanding of the desired end state toward which all of our efforts aspire (a “north star”). Consequently, we struggle to share understanding of the performance problem(s) we face, the solution(s) we are using to address the problem(s), and the logic of how we would employ those solutions to get to the desired end state. This lack of shared understanding undermines our abilities to effectively team. Barzelay (1992) contends, “for a situation to be defined as either a problem or condition, people have to decide whether it can and should be improved” (p. 21). The trick that public managers are trying to achieve is having an agreed upon set of purposes that is broad and abstract enough to feel significant and important to many, but narrow and concrete enough to make the connection between actions that individuals and teams are actually taking and the ultimate goals.

In BPS, because the district has not clearly defined the north star toward which all of our efforts gravitate, it becomes harder to make decisions about whether the conditions we are experiencing are the problem we want to tackle or whether they are just components of the ecosystem in which we live. Because of this lack of common orientation around problem, solution, logic, or north star, individuals and teams struggle to understand how they are set up to tackle big problems. Assumptions, by individuals and teams, abound in BPS’s organizational context – about how change should work and who is driving what. Questions to address or surface these assumptions also abound, but are generally removed from system-wide conversations about how these pieces come together and from any enforced decision-making structure. The end result is feelings of incongruence or confusion, with individuals and teams working toward big-picture goals

for the district absent an understanding how the pieces fit together.

This conclusion bears out in the data from the surveys I administered, and it was echoed very clearly by more impartial observers as well. In November 2016, the Aspen Institute made a “Critical Friends Visit” to BPS with a group of district leaders and researchers from around the country for one day of context gathering and focus groups around a central problem of practice identified by the district: Are any of our instructional reforms bearing fruit? What is gaining traction right now? At the end of one day, the conclusion from the visitors assembled by Aspen was clear: an inspiring instructional vision has been painted for educators, but when asked specifically about what the district’s north star was, interviewees struggled to answer. There was no clear vision for what Boston kids can do in their lives when they are done with BPS. We did not have a “common anchor” toward which all of our work aspires, and “no clear theory of change emerged in the conversations” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Nov. 2016). Clear themes emerged from existing theories in use, e.g. that principals and Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) are key roles and structures in improving instructional practice, but it was not clear what is supposed to happen after that (e.g. how to support those entities, what these entities are supposed to produce, how they are supposed to lead). Absent this shared logic, it becomes harder then to make connections back to the way we traditionally measure or evaluate performance in the system.

My lived experience at BPS largely reflects this as well. I remember from the beginning of residency trying to figure out the various names we give to instructional priorities, but struggling to decipher which was which. When I pushed on this in conversation with others, I was told “I think we all know what the good looks like” by a

member of our Academics team, or that priorities “just fall into the category of good instruction” by an Instructional Superintendent. This lack of clarity at best may demonstrate the intersectionality of these various instructional tenets and approaches – but at worst may conflate everything into a big morass, recognizable to the seasoned veteran educator but unclear to anyone new to the practice. It took me personally about six months to firmly decipher what the district’s instructional priorities were – and largely only because I was tasked to articulate them clearly in a presentation for our visitors from the Aspen Institute at that time. It led me to believe that individuals across the district have so much knowledge and context in their heads, but if they do not take time to carefully spell it all out, we miss out on illustrations of logic that would help us work better together and all approach change the same way.

In her book, Edmondson discusses the imperative of well-calibrated mental models of organizational strategy for teams to succeed: if teams do not take the time to thoroughly understand organizational strategy – i.e. the chain of logic that would lead us from our current state experiencing performance problems or challenges, through the steps that we would take to get to mutually agreed-upon solutions – then we will struggle or flounder in the work we have set out to do. This phenomenon has the potential to completely derail teams within the system: if teams are untethered to a clear, consequential, and challenging purpose that ideally rolls up into the district’s overall strategy (a la Wageman et al.), the uncertainty makes it difficult or nearly impossible to reliably understand whether day-to-day efforts in one’s own role and on one’s team are really moving the ball forward toward hazily defined aims. This is why Weick (1976) discusses – “given the ambiguity of loosely coupled structures” – that “there may be

increased pressure on members to construct or negotiate some kind of social reality they can live with. Therefore, under conditions of loose coupling, one should see considerable effort devoted to constructing social reality, a great amount of face work and linguistic work, numerous myths...and in general one should find a considerable amount of effort being devoted to punctuating this loosely coupled world and connecting it in some way in which it can be made sensible” (p. 13). Individuals in this environment spend a great deal of time in sense-making mode, trying to figure out how tasks and purposes align to what Weick (1976) dubbed the social realities of the system, leading in excess to a “preoccupation with linguistic work” (p. 13). This mental modeling takes a great deal of time to work through and, I have found, it often feels like a distraction or an elusive target when other, more tangible accountabilities are on the line. In other words, this sense-making would be imminently helpful in figuring how to best go about tangible tasks, but the linguistic work is so unpredictable and subjective by nature that attempting to do so can often feel destined to fail – especially amidst the pressures of time and competing accountabilities. In this scenario, teams or individuals are still left with the same deliverables they had earlier but with less time to complete them. Team members accordingly make choices between these ends all the time.

A teammate in ASSET nicely summarized this phenomenon: “You can’t aspire toward what you can’t articulate” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Dec. 2016). I would expand this as you also cannot witness or measure what you cannot articulate. While linkages certainly exist in the work, recognizing them or even leveraging them is distinct and separate from commonly working toward a north star. As I have come to conceptualize, the stars may be near each other; they may even align from time to time –

but that does not mean that we have a common orientation of what or where the sun is in the sky.

Role of the School Leader: The most important example I can elevate to illustrate this lack of common understanding in the system is the school leader. There is an oft-spoken but uncoded sacrosanctity about the role of the school leader in driving change in the BPS system. I argue that above almost everything else – including closure of opportunity and achievement gaps – we honor, respect, and prioritize the autonomy of the school leader to determine and address the most pressing performance issues facing schools. While this understanding is surely undergirded by research (see for example Wallace Foundation, 2004), we do not explicitly share the same logic about the ways that inputs offered by central office or elsewhere translate through school leaders into real impacts on classrooms. In essence, we have placed so many bets on the ability of the school leader to integrate instructional reforms that I characterize the centrality of the school leader in Boston as *inevitable*. I use this word intentionally to underscore that – while we share good faith understanding that the school leader is a key lever in making instructional improvement happen – we do not have a uniform understanding of the way that lever works.

I have observed that leadership does not have a clear or consistent sense of whether or not school leaders are leading with the same priorities that the Superintendent and district lead with, namely the elimination of opportunity and achievement gaps. Central office teams offer various and sometimes conflicting supports to schools and school leaders absent a clear or fully specified road map of how they fit together. School leaders are expected to make sense of these disparate inputs (i.e. centrally desired ends

and suggested means for achieving them) either independently or through their own relational capacity and social capital at central office to identify high-priority areas for action and deploy resources to solve them. The determination of problems – which manifests primarily through day-to-day actions and micro-behaviors, which certainly the school leader is best positioned to observe – is deferred to local expertise. Solutions (vis-à-vis resources provided by various central office functions like staffing and budget) contain contributions from various central office teams, but how school leaders mobilize those resources and supports to reach a desired end state is not fully explicated in any real procedure and, by its nature, left for discretion at the school site by the school leader.

This stated philosophy of teams as change agent that we profess in words is contested by the individual-focused nature of accountability in the bureaucratic environment of a K-12 school system. This theme emerged in the feedback the district received from the Aspen Institute: it was clear we are placing bets on principals, and it is clear that we are placing a bet on Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), but it is not clear what is supposed to happen with or through these individuals and teams. It was clear also to the Aspen visitors that we as a district have identified adult learning as a key lever for making change (see Appendix A for instructional theory of change), but it was also clear that there was no consensus around how adults learn best: “That’s a black box, both from central office offerings as well as within ILTs” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Nov. 2016). It is as if we want teams and team capacity to be the true driver for improvement in the instructional core, but because we exist in an accountability-driven hierarchy we lean into the individuals (e.g. school leaders) as the primary change agent. As we do, we generally raise the ante significantly on what we expect out of individual

performance (e.g. that of a school leader) rather than out of team performance (e.g. that of an ILT). As a district, we send mixed signals when we proclaim that “reform cannot be mandated from top – we don’t control instructional practice” and then we program nearly all central office support to individual leaders sitting at the top of school structures (Personal communication, M. Wall, Dec. 2016).

This disposition comes with huge opportunity cost for building capacity in any other school-level role or team. In my albeit limited experience, central office often overlooks distributive leadership capacity (e.g. from lead teachers, assistant principals, directors of instruction, coaches, and other school-based administration and leadership) in yielding to the decision-making of the school leader (and, by extension, an individual-oriented accountability structure). It is even challenging to program support to these non-principal, non-headmaster roles because of the very deference we have built into the existing system, i.e. because we have given school leaders the autonomy to budget and staff their schools according to their own diagnosis of need, there is vast inconsistency among the functions and responsibilities of school leadership roles that make it hard for central office to program professional learning.

The opportunity cost of this focus on the school leader also extends to the teacher, who by and large is subject to professional development and capacity building in large majority at the direction of the school leader (Personal communication, M. Wall, Mar. 2017). Bryk et al. (2013) argued that we, as a reform-hungry nation, have historically overlooked the learning needs of teachers in seeking out large-scale reforms: at base, we have “a common story of implementing fast and learning slow. As a field, we undervalue learning to improve in a way that is systematic and organized, and we lack a

methodology to guide it. This should trouble all of us” (p. 6). This need is not unnoticed by central office leadership: for example, upon trying to develop a menu of services that one ASSET office could offer Instructional Superintendents (to in turn offer to school leaders) at a December 2016 meeting, almost all of the requests were targeted at teachers – not school leaders. It left me reflecting on a system that programs seemingly infinite priorities for a finite group of individuals – 125 school leaders – for sake of ease of transmission and accountability while we may be overlooking more than 4,000 additional soldiers who could drive critical reforms forward through their interactions with students each day.

2. Because we lack shared understanding, we identify too many items as priority for the district. Having innumerable priorities causes us to lead as if we have no priorities, because everything is important. This lack of focus undermines team capacity and sends mixed messages about the importance of teaming in the context of accountability. I was told by a professor very early in the Ed.L.D. program that having ten priorities meant having no priorities, and that if everything is important then nothing is important. These adages rang true in my time at BPS. Being under-disciplined with priorities ultimately makes it difficult for team members to discern the unique value that only they can produce as a team and how that team fits into a broader organizational mission. In the end, this lack of clarity has negative impacts on teams, setting them up for interpersonal conflict and erosions of trust within and across teams – this ultimately has deleterious effects on the work.

Inside a bureaucracy, the world looks vastly different from each hierarchical level and each silo of the organization; thus, while priorities may seem clear to the leadership,

the lived experience can feel a lot hazier to those down at lower rungs of the organizational ladder. There are legitimate reasons for letting priorities abound and staying loose or ambiguous with what is most important: as discussed in Chapter 2, doing so allows the district to advance the interests of a wide array of important stakeholders (inside and outside central office) on whom the district relies overall for operational capacity or legitimacy and support. It also allows for senior leadership to maximize a sense of urgency around many problems and thus mobilize resources to accelerate progress simultaneously. Wageman et al. (2008) say this is a mistake – that differences in organizational direction “will come out in one way or another, even though keeping team purposes ambiguous can allow the chief executive to keep [disagreements] off the team’s table for a while” (p. 67). As I observed during my residency at BPS, individuals and teams compete for attention or resources from top leadership, while there is a sense of opacity about decision making about priorities – what priorities truly are or whether or not decisions on prioritization are made at all. The situation feels unstable or untenable to the individual team member, as (implicitly or explicitly) “senior executives make independent choices that reflect only their own perspectives and preferences about collective decisions,” and “sooner or later the disagreements will burst out, but the longer they are put off, the less likely it is that the team will be able to deal with them competently” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 67).

The teaming literature explains that, in high-functioning teams, members trust that other members will “carry their water” for them even when members cannot be present, meaning that they will advance their, their office’s, or their role’s priorities even in their absence. I have observed frequently at BPS that this trust is less than intact. Its absence

has been especially evident during the creation of the district's Instructional Position Paper. Meant to be a comprehensive but comprehensible distillation of the district's guiding principles and philosophies toward rigorous, accessible instruction, it is arguably the most interdependent task that ASSET has engaged in during my year at BPS. It is also the closest approximation we have made to declaring with specificity what our "vision of the good" is for instruction in the district. In collaborating on the Paper, I saw individuals become animated defending specific instructional frameworks on which much of their own professional practice is based. For example, although countless feedback surfaced to strip down the "edu-speak" jargon from the Paper, specific frameworks (like Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, or MTSS) frequently resurfaced as critical to the context of the Paper. While a framework like MTSS is describable in more general terms (e.g. academic and behavioral interventions in line with the level of students' needs), contributors clung to their acronyms as though they were nonnegotiable attributes in our system's understanding of good teaching and learning.

While the Instructional Position Paper is a fairly high-stakes interdependent task, it took me time to realize that a side effect of an everything-is-priority paradigm is that both individuals and teams may more easily experience threat and loss. Because individuals and teams are never really sure whether or not a core component of their work – and really of their professional identity – will be taken into account in the master scheme of district planning, they do not miss a chance to advocate for it at every moment. In the midst of these innumerable priorities is a high presence of what feel like "make or break" moments in meetings and exchanges: when it feels as though ground could be ceded, representatives from each camp stand up to defend their causes. This explains

some of the perceived incoherence from the perspective of school leaders, who observe central office members essentially competing for supremacy of their position or interests in instructional support. In observing this behavior, I regularly reflected: Why does every opportunity seem like our last? Why do we so quickly elevate from day-to-day operations to high-stakes consequences?

I postulate that team members experience more make-or-break moments because they do not know if anyone will “carry their water” for them when they are not watching or they are not present in the room. In effect, the stakes are permanently raised, leading to increasingly psychologically unsafe feelings in the workplace and a persistent vigilance that the work will end if they not take every last step to advance it.

Coherence Derailers. While the above framing paints a picture of the BPS staff member stunted in confusion around organizational priorities, there is another side of the coin. The everything-is-priority paradigm can have the net effect of pitting priorities or – much worse – teams or team members against each other in order to score individual or team gains. At a minimum, because of an alleged shortage of time (which as much reflects lack of organizational focus as it does hours in the day), teams often struggle to decipher where their true interdependencies lie; absent this clear sense, team members make choices about where to invest their efforts. As I was told by a member of our Academics team, “We are all competing for the same people's head space”– we are always attempting to get the same people to focus on multiple things at once even when we know “that's not how the brain works” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Feb. 2017). In this competition, there end up being *de facto* winners and losers, where priorities either make progress or are left languishing.

A less benign interpretation of this competitive edge could be that some teams or team members are actually exploiting the incoherence to advance their own aims. In the everything-is-priority paradigm, the sophisticated *coherence derailer* is able to take advantage of the loose coupling and lack of systemness in order to become a winner and avoid becoming a loser. Wageman et al. (2008) characterize a derailer as a person who “publically appears to buy into the program but who actually is quietly working in the background to subvert it” (p. 98). Among a constellation of teams across an organization, such exploitation of the incoherence can indeed work to subvert the intentional work of teams and may have detrimental impacts on intra- and inter-team effectiveness.

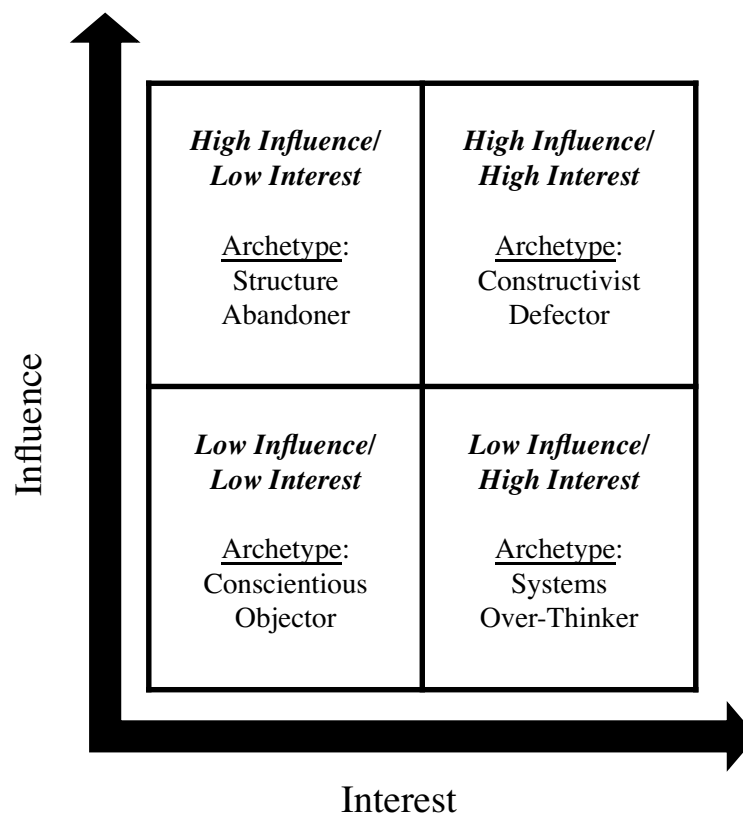
I have identified four types of what I am calling *coherence derailers* in my time at BPS. It is important to reiterate that for all four of them I cannot confirm their motives (i.e. I do not know if they are truly seeking to subvert efforts). Nonetheless, the actions or inactions of these four archetypes still have the net effect of derailing intentional efforts toward system coherence or team performance. As a further repeated caveat, I note that these descriptions are based on my perspective and my perspective alone, from where I sit in the organization both horizontally and vertically. I also note that – as much as I have observed these tendencies in others – I too have exhibited these tendencies from time to time during the year. It sometimes feels instinctual to do so when trying to get important work done in what can sometimes feel like a confusing or incoherent organizational context. I point out these archetypes so organizationally we can see that we have choice in using them. While that means appealing to our heart of (coherent) hearts to do the coherence building work, individuals may not always be inclined to do so. Getting past the exploitation of incoherence requires us to try to trust in the system – a

challenging feat for those who feel like they have been repeatedly abused by it. That said, absent that trust, it will be hard to ever forge a collaborative path forward to greater systemness.

Figure 4.1 displays these coherence derailers on the axes of influence and interest; the subsequent bullets provide description of the archetype associated with each quadrant:

Figure 4.1

Coherence Derailers



Quadrant 1: High Influence/Low Interest

Archetype: Structure Abandoner

- Description: District leaders add structures like teams to reign in the chaos and crazy of the environment. These structures feel different and (at least for some initial period) uncomfortable, even sometimes when well run. Because it feels uncomfortable, team members find ways to abandon new structures (e.g. they arrive late, leave early, do not engage when present, or walk away from them

altogether). Unfortunately, they sometimes go on to lament that the chaos persists! In effect, the intended outcome for the structure (process or product) stops out, which feels of very little consequence or urgency to the structure abandoner.

- Sample quotations: “Aren’t we over-structuring this meeting?” “Can we take some of these meetings off the calendar?”

Quadrant 2: High Influence/High Interest

Archetype: Constructivist Defector

- Description: High-demand team members who do not attend meetings (because leaders were busy, or they did not want to) later cry foul that their views were not adequately represented in deliberations. Because the defector does not trust what he was not personally present for, he appeals to the powers that be to slow down (or stop up) decisions made in their absence. The condition is exacerbated by the positional authority or influence level of the defector, which simultaneously grants him greater license to skip undesired meetings, to appeal to top brass when he does not like the outcomes, and to maintain his own flexibility to act in the future. Unlike the structure abandoner, the constructivist defector is invested in the outcome of the process. This condition is also exacerbated by an unclear sense of final decision-making within the team or organization.
- Sample quotation: “[Meeting/team] is useless and a waste of my time. I’m going to do an end run around this structure to get what I need.”

Quadrant 3: Low Influence/Low Interest

Archetype: Conscientious Objector

- Description: Team member never really engages in a new or existing process or structure, effectively denying it their operational capacity and hindering full deployment into coherence or alignment efforts. Unlike the structure abandoner, the conscientious objector never even begins engagement in a new structure; they just never subscribe. Like his higher influence counterparts, the conscientious objector is making a power play: even those with low influence in the organization can starve a new team or effort of resources.
- Sample quotation: Silence, or excuse after excuse for non-participation

Quadrant 4: Low Influence/High Interest

Archetype: Systems Over-Thinkers

- Description: Team member sees systems-level connections everywhere – and becomes virtually paralyzed by their implications. Because of positionality, or due to lack of clarity in decision-making authority, the systems over-thinker struggles to take action because everything has repercussions everywhere else. As a result, the task becomes daunting in its enormity, as over-thinkers spin into vast series of endless implications. Their intent is good; they are invested in a positive outcome for the process. They just cannot see a path forward without also considering or taking myriad other paths. The condition is exacerbated when untethered to clear, shared systems-level understanding around “north star” vision, problem, strategy, or solution.

- Sample quotation: “But if we change to a competency-based approach for school leader learning, how do we change the professional learning we offer? And the way we evaluate school leaders? And how that connects to the teacher evaluation rubric?”

The archetypes are meant to be illustrative and not restrictive: they typify some ways that I have observed coherence-seeking efforts become derailed at BPS, though certainly there are more arguments that derailers may put forward to advance their interests. It is important to note that the coherence derailer can use incoherence in the system more positively as self-defense and more negatively as a weapon. In either case, I have generally observed that those with greater levels of influence and/or positional authority within the organization are generally more successful at derailing – though not exclusively so, as the reluctance toward or outright lack of engagement of lower-influence staff members also can yield the derailing effect. In either case, those with lower levels of interest generally are more able to walk away from coherence building, either because they can lean on their own authority to get things done or because they never experience motivation to subscribe in the first place. Regardless of the quadrant in which a derailer may be located, the net effect is the same.

Accountability Context. The everything-is-priority paradigm in many ways is the outcome of being unable to say no to key authorizers and operators inside and outside of the organization. As the literature points out, the district superintendent serves too many masters – making the accountability he or she personally faces feel incoherent (see for example Moore and Alonso, 2014). In surveying the broader environment in which the public sector organization operates, as well as the various offices and silos within a bureaucracy upon which the public manager relies on to produce value, Moore (1995) identifies four elements of political management: “building (1) a climate of tolerance,

active support, or ongoing operational assistance for (2) a manager, a policy, or an overall strategy among (3) those outside the scope of an official's direct authority whose (4) authorizations or operational assistance are necessary to achieve the public purposes for which the official will be held accountable" (p. 113). It is highly likely that this great multitude of stakeholders and constituents comes with a robust and likely conflicting array of demands for district leadership. As Moore and Alonso (2014) state, "because many stakeholders think they have the right to call them to account for performance on particular dimensions of value of concern to them, they face a relatively anarchic rather than coherent system of accountability that requires them to deal with demands for accountability that come at them from many different directions with no clear priority" (p. 10). While some demands on the district superintendent are predictable, many are not, and "the variety, volatility, and intensity of the oversight structure can make school superintendents feel they are under siege" (Moore and Alonso, 2014, p. 15).

It is no easy feat to politically manage this diverse array of interests – and this feeling of incoherence is not unique to a district like BPS. There are many tactics for managing all of the competing interests, one of which – which I have witnessed being employed by the current BPS administration – is saying yes to taking on a great deal of the problems or priorities that come their way in order to satisfy the vast array of interests. In doing so, though, absent a shared understanding of what problem we are trying to solve, there is a danger that it can lead to a tendency of viewing every problem or prospective solution as equal in magnitude of importance or urgency.

Priorities come from inside and outside of the central office building (e.g. tackling persistent achievement gaps for English learners, or addressing chronic homelessness

among BPS youth), and are situated in an unforgiving political environment in which schools have shifted from being primarily ports of access for students to being outcomes-oriented producers for our society. As schools take on additional roles of driving inequity out of our communities, none of the old assignments that school districts were entrusted to create public value have gone away – new layers just get added on. At the end of the day, honoring all of these demands and roles, which we view largely as requisite by circumstance of our political environment, means that we do not get very far in honoring any of them. This sort of response most certainly yields an untenable public management situation in which (positively) we appear responsive to the needs of many in our environment but only (negatively) at the expense of ceding ground and focus on our own proactive agenda for change and only weakly serving most priorities. By and large we have not yet built the case politically for focusing in and selecting a small array of reforms to address specific student gaps – or if we have, it is not discernable in a sea of other priorities.

In this context in which so many things are held up as priority and regarded as important or urgent, staff and managers alike do not have a clear understanding of what they are looking for in performance. As a result, staff and managers alike struggle in understanding the role that accountability plays in day-to-day organizational operations or strategic improvement. Precisely because managers are looking for too much, any attempt at a formal accountability structure becomes tremendously complicated. Problems are frequently presented as the same in urgency and importance; public managers and line staff alike cannot possibly follow up on everything and face difficulty in discerning which tasks are truly most important to their superiors on a day-by-day or

even year-by-year basis. In the context of a team, which may have inherited a purpose where everything is defined as mission-critical, team members may find themselves confused or struggling to discern what is truly priority and what is not, leading to feelings of consternation among members and overall beliefs of inefficacy of the team structure itself.

The lack of clear and consistent accountability may become frustrating unto itself for team members, at worst giving the impression that any quality of work is acceptable and at best forcing them to exercise significant caution in their actions. This will likely yield environments of low psychological safety: it becomes much harder to admit having made a mistake when it is unclear if the ball you dropped is the most important one. These conditions aggravate fear in a hierarchical accountability structure, because neither evaluators nor the evaluated have a clear sense of what to follow up on or what someone will followed up on with them. Edmondson (2012) claims, “when uncertainty clouds our thoughts and views, especially views that appear to be at odds with others’, we often take the path of reduced interpersonal resistance” in order to mitigate or minimize interpersonal risk and save face (Edmondson, 2012, p. 125). The end result is a mixture of good and bad outcomes, yielded both from actions and inactions taken in the existence of nebulous but omnipresent accountability.

3. As a system, we do not prioritize organizational learning or reflection. As a result, we live out incongruities between our espoused values and enacted values, in effect perpetuating the problem of practice we have already admitted to having. In his bestselling 2001 book *Good to Great*, Collins described what he calls the hedgehog concept as a tool for organizational focus and improvement. In alluding to a famous essay

by Berlin, he claims, “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing” (2001, p. 90). Hedgehogs, he claims, “simplify a complex world into a single, organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything” (2001, p. 91). As he rightly admits, sometimes the concept itself is almost too simplistic – but the idea behind it is driving organizational focus toward one singular idea that communicates clearly “an understanding at what you can be the best at” (2001, p. 98).

I cite this example from the business literature because it has gained a lot of traction around BPS as we try to figure out our organizational focus. I facilitated a retreat for the ASSET team in December 2016 where we tried, struggled, and ultimately failed to define what our hedgehog is as a team – in large part because we could not figure out what the district’s or system’s hedgehog is overall. As was repeated many times in that retreat and in subsequent discussions, landing on a hedgehog for an individual unit or team is a dicey proposition unless you understand how it fits into the broader strategy – into the district’s hedgehog, essentially. We can pick one, my teammates would argue, and try to keep working on it through our own accord, but we always risk being interrupted by others – by competing hedgehogs also struggling to assert their dominance or superiority, absent one unifying understanding of what the district can be best at.

This line of thinking, then, is what yielded one of my teammates in ASSET to declare, “as a district, our hedgehog is ‘go figure it out yourself.’”

I continue to be amazed by the astuteness of this assessment. Essentially, in a bureaucratic context and an everything-is-priority paradigm, we have become master mavericks, figuring out for ourselves how to take advantage of the system as it currently stands to get things done. We feel the pinch of accountability amidst a haze of unclear

priorities. We operate knowing that our efforts could be impugned at any moment, or someone could call us to account on one of many different tasks we have been assigned. So, in the context of too many priorities, no clear north star, and with poor reflexes for reflection, we exhibit superhero strength to get the job done – often without much regard for doing so in intentional team structures we have set up for collaboration or, alternatively, in exploitation of the hierarchy so that we can just get things done. In other words, despite these challenges the system environment presents, many tasks still get accomplished – but largely because of the bureaucracy and hierarchy, and in spite of the teaming spirit we embrace.

This phenomenon was illustrated in a subsequent retreat I facilitated in March 2017 for the ASSET leadership team. In making sense of the TDS data I presented in Chapter 3, the team concluded that we do not perform much peer coaching of each other and recognized that it would be a growth edge for us. When presented with an opportunity to do so through an activity around intentionally defining team roles, we struggled with whether or not to set ourselves up for structures like peer coaching that advance the function of our team, or whether or not we default to traditional managerial relationships for evaluation and accountability. While we did not come to a clear consensus, the tension of this choice was palpable: do we take a chance in intentionally building the egalitarian, instructional roundtable team we envision? Or do we just call it like it is and use the hierarchy to get the job done?

Edmondson's model toward which I aspire in my personal theory of action – execution-as-learning – requires that the organization take time to step back and digest these dynamics of day-to-day performance. But that becomes hard to do when the pace

and quantity of tasks is so demanding. Under this condition, and in a bureaucratic structure, we continuously implicitly and explicitly reward top performance by those who “figure it out” in spite of the system rather than within, because of, or through the system. We even aid and abet it, as evidenced by an Instructional Superintendent who told me about practices used in her position to help school leaders “get around the system and its holdbacks,” saying “we coach [school leaders] on ways to get around systemic hurdles...my job is to coach principals on how to break rules or what to ignore in order to have the focus to get things done and make real change at school level” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Dec. 2016). While such a spirit somewhat falls in line with our espoused centrality of the role of the school leader, in effect we are perpetuating inequities by exploiting the lack of systemness we have, and we are sending mixed messages about the importance of teams as a fundamental unit of change for seemingly intractable problems when the buck generally stops at individuals.

I was frequently and in many ways told during my time at BPS that “we do not have the luxury to prioritize,” or to step back and question some of the assumptions under which we operate (Personal communication, M. Wall, Jan. 2017). In effect, though, absent this reflection, the organization may act as though it is uncontrollably subject to the conditions it experiences on a day-to-day basis. In this excess, this can mean accepting the system as it is currently constructed. Of course, we do not have the luxury to immediately cease being reactive to the authorizing environment or to stop responding to urgent student safety or support needs. Nonetheless, doing so just because we have become accustomed to it generally ends up perpetuating the existing brokenness in the system we have (which is the system we explicitly named in our problem of practice as

generating inequity in our district). In other words, if we are not careful and fastidious in reflection, we could end up perpetuating the inequities that we originally asked teams to vanquish.

A dearth of organizational reflection and learning is clearly evidenced in the inconsistencies and contradictions that the system permits. We already acknowledged as much in the system's problem of practice (see Appendix A) that states that opportunities (and thus achievements) are inconsistent and have had the effect of marginalizing students. When school leaders get things done piecemeal in a system dominated by their own autonomy and individually based accountability, students are at incredible risk of falling through the cracks. As a colleague in ASSET told me in his own interpretation of the district's problem of practice, "the savvy of the principal is what determines which students succeed" (Personal communication, M. Wall, Nov. 2016). Another colleague told me, "the best schools [and thereby the best school leaders] in the district are those who have figured out how to work the system" (Personal communication, M. Wall, Jan. 2017). While only reflecting the views of two central office colleagues, both statements necessarily imply that – despite the best of intentions from dedicated educators – some school leaders (and by extension their students) get ahead in their hustling for resources while others fall behind. Because we have set up tasks to incentivize and reward individual behavior and performance, it is much easier to "go figure it out" just for the students in one's school, rather than looking across the system in recognition that BPS students (in the oft-repeated phrase) are "all of our kids," and that they belong to the whole system. In effect, individual accountability and currents of change often keep the system pulling in opposite directions.

Systems-level conditions are often self-reinforcing in driving the organization away from reflection: without a clear slate of priorities, it is harder to build out infrastructure to meaningfully measure progress toward strategic aims. Absent some data infrastructure, and especially in a knowledge-intensive setting, reflection is made all the more challenging to understand how we are doing and whether we need mid-course corrections. And because of the broader systems-level forces of hierarchical accountability, we are especially disinclined to discuss or admit failure for fear of repercussions. While it occasionally surfaced, it is rarely mined or systematically examined for learning that could be transferred to other pursuits or even to subsequent iterations of the same pursuit.

Looking school by school, rather than systematically across the district, can have devastating effects on individual students. In the system as currently structured, some school leaders feel at liberty to remove students from their own schools in order to keep their school higher performing, at the cost to the school that inherits the same student with the same set of needs, and (even costlier) to the student who experiences greater transition and instability. This arrangement is what allows tracking into special education to persist; as a colleague in that department has stated, “a single principal phone call to declare a student is emotionally impaired can derail that student’s entire life” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Oct. 2016). Because as a system we accommodate school leader prerogative in that moment and handle things on a case-by-case basis, we miss the opportunity to reflect on and discover the root causes in the environment that are really triggering that student’s failure in the first place. Such a lack of systematic approach can have permanent impact on students. While student mobility might occur in good spirit of

accommodating real instructional concerns of school leaders and teachers, it can also translate into avoidance of tough diagnosis of the problem and of organizational reflection and learning to address it. In essence, we can perpetuate the inequity we seek to vanquish from the system; unbridled school leader prerogative – in the context of our current system – allows vast inequities to persist.

The teaming literature tells us we need to design tasks intentionally for interdependence – but doing so well means being mindful of the entire lifecycle of the task, the ecosystem it exists in, and the various pressures that the individuals on the team are facing in completing their task (especially in competition with other tasks). A lack of organizational clarity – and subsequent lack of reflection on it – has damaging effects at central office teams as well: interpersonal conflicts and feelings of inequality with staff in a competitive environment in which they cannot always discern whether or not they are operating “on the same team” as other colleagues. To fully appreciate the gravity of any single task becomes an exercise in empathy. I have noted even just for myself that living amidst this organizational chaos becomes a tiring affair; it has tremendous potential to wear us down, hindering the tough work that we seek to do. It becomes challenging to even pop one’s head out of the haze for a second when you are constantly in execution mode, firing on all cylinders. As a professor of mine reminded me when we spoke about conditions in the system earlier this year, “It is very consuming to run the status quo in education as is, let alone map the strategy for how you want to transform it” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Jan. 2017).

Summary

Survey data suggest a dissatisfaction with the supports that BPS central office (on

the whole) is producing, as well as a mixed picture of the ways in which one central office team – ASSET – can build its capacity for future work and contribute to individual learning and wellbeing. Several aspects of our system as currently constructed are salient in complicating the high performance of teams toward challenging problems. In general, I argue that we do not share understanding of the desired end state toward which all of our efforts aspire and we struggle in reaching shared understanding of problem, solution, or theory of action. In the absence of that shared understanding, we identify too many priorities for the district, which undermines team capacity and sends mixed messages about whether or not teaming is really crucial in solving our problems. In large part, I argue we do this because it is easier and more expeditious to continue to exploit the hierarchy and accountability that bureaucracy provides us, fulfilling many of the tasks we set out to achieve. However, it comes at a cost to the values of teaming that we have set out to use in addressing our problems, in effect weakening the overall approach or product. I argue that we must prioritize organizational learning and reflection so that we can critically examine the ways in which these conditions perpetuate the problem of practice we have already admitted to having. I present some ways to do so in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined some implications for the work that lies ahead for Boston Public Schools (BPS), the public K-12 education sector, and for myself as a leader within both. These implications suggest courses of actions as well as some potential reframing for mindsets and beliefs to advance the work of teams in approaching the wicked problems that school districts face. I end with some brief concluding remarks about the work that lies ahead for teams in public school districts.

Site Implications

In writing my analysis, I struggled a bit in balancing truth with empathy: I both sought to be as candid as possible in calling out critical items for attention, while also recognizing the nearly impossible parameters that are laid out for district leaders. As Moore and Alonso (2014) state, “Making executive decisions in this context can challenge even the most determined and confident public manager. It often feels like an impossible job, and of the few brave enough to undertake it, even fewer manage to stay in the job long enough to shepherd through real changes” (p. 15). The work requires a great deal of bravery – both in making commitments and saying yes, and in making tough calls and saying no. Either way that a leader responds, the he or she must continue to grapple with the risks of diluting his or her own principles for reform. It is a tricky balance, and the district still has room to grow in fostering it.

I also struggled in writing these implications because I would not want BPS to move too quickly to corrective action based on the arguments I presented. If I have had even one modicum of impact during my ten months in the district, I hope it has been in imparting the value of performing deliberate, deep, and authentic problem diagnosis. Too

many site-level implications would suggest a clear or easy path forward, which is far from my intentions. It is my hope that district leadership can first take my analysis and pick it apart, finding areas of agreement and – even more importantly – having discussions about disagreements. Grappling with my perspectives as a relative outsider to the district, in combination with the decades of collective experience across BPS leadership, would help tremendously in contextualizing the recommendations I make in this chapter and in co-creating a shared course of action toward the priorities of teaming and of closing opportunity and achievement gaps that the district has put forward. Much like how taking the teaming survey can be an intervention in and of itself, I hope my analysis can also serve as a jumping-off point for sincere conversation about the mental modeling we employ to make change in Boston schools.

With that in mind, I lay out several implications and considerations for action that BPS might take considering the points I raised in this capstone:

1. Identify, elevate, and learn from team performance on a deliberately small number of highly interdependent tasks. What we ask teams to do now is predictive of how they will perform when they are given new tasks in the future. I suggest a modified approach to the way we have pursued teaming at BPS in the past that instead focuses on establishing small teams producing whole, identifiable pieces of work in response to an intentionally small number of tasks. Team leaders must be deliberate in selecting tasks that maximize interdependence among cross-functional groups of people and that maximize opportunities for reflection and learning, particularly considering the task environment in which the work takes place.

Opportunities abound for which tasks could be elevated for this intentional approach to teaming; in fact, many are already in motion and could be seized on as a model (including the district's development of an Instructional Position Paper and the annual school budget process). However, an important complementary to task selection is that leaders must give teams the time and mental space to truly work as a unit toward collective goals, including for authentic co-creation of work products, planning toward implementation goals, and collecting data on performance and impact that will be analyzed and brought forward into future action cycles. Absent this complementary, teams are bound to suffer from the same pitfalls they face in the current task environment.

“Clearing the deck,” so to speak, means making tough choices to elevate some priorities and minimize others. We must stop looking at having so many priorities as a permanent and unchangeable condition to which we are subject, and give ourselves permission to narrow the focus. With one hundred percent confidence, doing so comes with political fallout. But deliberately saying no opens doors to strategically improving organizational performance around areas that truly are of greatest importance, including unleashing teams on long-held, seemingly intractable problems.

Another important supplement to this work is the framing that team leaders give to the tasks they assign to the team: team leaders must be unapologetic in framing and communicating the interdependencies of tasks. Leaders must set expectations for where they expect interdependencies to play out through the course of a task, and be plainspoken and honest about where they might expect risks or mistakes to arise. Newfound interdependencies are likely to surface conflict as team members work

together. It is incumbent on the team leader – especially in the early stages of the team – to arbitrate team interdependencies and deliberately choose a finite number of discrete tasks that she believes only this team can successfully accomplish. Considering how easy it is to backslide into decades of organizational divisions in traditional central office silos, the imperative of intentionally interdependent framing by team leaders cannot be understated as genuinely interdependent teams slowly move to overcome their institutional momentum to keep working in silos.

Team leaders may ameliorate some of these concerns by setting and advancing a clear set of norms and boundaries in the language they would like to hear from their team in doing so. One suggestion for how to lightly enter new grounds of interdependencies may be to hold team meetings in which members are prohibited from speaking from the perspectives that their role would traditionally advocate (e.g. a representative from the Office of English Language Learners cannot speak on the linguistic background or needs of children). It may seem like a small step, but it could help to force interdependencies in new ways by helping to (in the words of Weick) create new social realities in which team members make sense of their new experience together and work aligned to their purpose.

2. Set up a team launch process and expectations for team performance, and celebrate teams that are high performing. A process for establishing and setting up teams, including standards or expectations for team performance, could be a powerful way to institutionalize and implement the valuable collaborative approach that district leadership seeks in using teams to address critical problems. A process could lay out steps to ensure that teams can be “real,” in the words of Wageman et al. (2005), namely that they are interdependent, stable, and bounded. It could address roles to be played on

the team and expectations for contributions among specific members.

Most importantly, such a process could force organizational leaders into much more precise levels of clarity around team purpose – articulating it in such a way that it allows leaders (and team members) to hold themselves accountable to the purposes they set up for themselves. Intentionally establishing a team with a consequential, challenging, and clear purpose based on a very limited number of high-impact, interdependent tasks requires a degree of dogged clarity in the team's leader that can be elusive and emotionally demanding. Even just enlisting members for the team can “uncover discrepancies and conflicts about what members think their role is or should be” (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 78). This degree of clarity can breed discomfort or even awkwardness; navigating it well requires a level of skill in team leaders of big-picture thinking and small-scale implementation blended with the emotional and relational capacities to specify exactly what your team's purpose is at all times. However, being explicit throughout the process as to these fundamental aspects of team structures just brings into light the discomfort that already existed when team terms were left ambiguous. As Wageman et al. (2008) put it, “achieving clarity means being insistent and unapologetic about exercising your authority to specify your team's purpose,” even when those conversations can be difficult to have (p. 75).

This does not mean that once team structures or processes are set they are irreversible. It does, however, formalize the approach to teams in a way that aims to surface shared assumptions about how things will work from the outset, and can be used in learning cycles so that team leaders and members can return with regularity to the ways that they have explicitly set out to work.

Being clear and unapologetic about team purpose through a formal, institutionalized team launch process also makes way for teams that are focused on purposes other than execution. Using Wageman et al. (2008) and Christensen and Kaufman (2006)'s ways to categorize team based on the extent or profile of interdependence they exhibit, BPS can make clear choices when launching teams about the degree of interdependence they seek to foster among members. Teams need not always strive for the highest degree of interdependence if it is not suitable for the task at hand, and as discussed in Chapter 2, teams can hold latent benefits toward other complementary or altogether distinct tasks through the extent to which they enhance understanding of the organization and the many roles its teams and employees play in the relational capacity built in the team experience.

There is metacognitive benefit for teams in better understanding their own structure, the express expectations leaders have for their interdependence, and the processes and mental modeling by which they seek to produce or create change. It relates back to the low operational understanding of the distinction between “Office” and team revealed in the School Leader Support Survey data, in which respondents generally regarded the two terms interchangeably. This can be ok depending on the task at hand, but it also can create confusion in cross-functional endeavors in which team members are not clear how their personal contributions fit into a broader effort or strategy of the organization. Teams members, in other words, need not always feel psychologically interdependent when the interdependence demand of the task is relatively low; lower level contributions may suffice in those scenarios. However, when the task truly demands a new way of going about production – akin to what the Strategic Implementation Plan

required of ASSET – a backslide into a series of successive tasks (a kabuki of interdependence, so to speak) can be detrimental to the desired outcome, as teams may produce outputs that may technically meet the task parameters but fall short in achieving the level of impact being sought.

Wageman et al. also contend that among the dedicated resources that teams need to flourish are organizational rewards and recognitions for team performance. According to Wageman et al. (2008), teams need rewards “that recognize and reinforce team members for delivering on the team’s accountabilities” (e.g. tie bonuses to organizational performance, not just individual performance) and that “put significant team skin in the game” (p. 157). This goes beyond what Wilson (1989) calls three kinds of nonmaterial rewards in public sector: purpose, status, and solidarity for producing public value in a laudable organization upholding the public’s interest. Team performance must feel important to all members of a team and organization. That entails explicitly naming the value that teams are expected to produce on behalf of the organization’s mission or strategy, and holding up the entire team for achieving milestones together. Survey data from leaders within BPS reflected that they did not believe teamwork is rewarded. Recognizing and celebrating the authentic contributions of real teams (rather than just of individuals, or “team” efforts in name only) is a clear way to let the organization know that teamwork is valued – not just amongst leadership, but across and within organizational silos and levels of hierarchy.

3. Establish structures for systematically recognizing and learning from team failure. Bureaucratic environments are notoriously unsafe environments in which to admit failure or defeat. The district, though, must adopt a growth mindset and learner

stance toward everyday reflection and acknowledgement of failure. Not acknowledging failure means tacit acceptance of it. While the organization may not have been set up to hold organizational learning as priority, failing to systematically seek it out and to learn from failure will only perpetuate existing performance problems.

While we cannot control every single condition or exigency thrown at us, we can try harder to structure times for the organization to reflect on how we are meeting and falling short of priorities like opportunity and achievement gap closure, adult learning, or system coherence. Making it a safe environment in which to fail requires some intentional structures. Edmondson recommends setting clear boundaries for what is and what is not acceptable behavior in a psychologically safe environment, explicitly detailing end results and acceptable processes for trial-and-error that illustrate the logic and decisions that team members may face as they engage in team-based experimentation. She thinks of these boundaries like guardrails on a bridge: “If the guardrails are missing, you’re likely to drive as close to the center line as possible. It’s obviously frightening to drive near the bridge’s edge without rails in place. When teaming and learning, the equivalent is sticking to safe, trackable behaviors that shield you from possible punishment, while avoiding behaviors with interpersonal risk, like admitting mistakes, that may be interpreted as ‘outside the lines.’ With guardrails in place, you’re more likely to test the limits of current process and knowledge” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 145).

An important addition to these guardrails would be figuring out ways for individuals (like school leaders) and teams (like Instructional Leadership Teams) to exchange information and collaboratively learn from each other’s efforts. Structures set

up around practice by role could help to cross-pollinate and democratize the vast but imbalanced knowledge that individuals in our system hold so that it goes beyond the lucky few with social capital and can do more good for more students. Formally networking individuals or teams to learn from each other is not a new idea (see for example Bryk, 2013, on Networked Improvement Communities), and there is already hunger for it, as illustrated by one school leader respondent in my survey: “I would prefer to be supported by my colleagues. Make time for principals to learn from each other.” Creating expectations for what is acceptable behavior, for how and how often learning from failure should occur, and connecting individuals across the district to tap into that learning has the potential to unleash the power of currently uncoded, unnetworked knowledge in seasoned school leaders’ and bureaucrats’ heads. This knowledge can turn the organization more deliberately toward innovation and experimentation in attempting to address the wicked problems we have set out for teams to solve.

4. Develop a three-year scope and sequence for coherence building in the system, and celebrate coherence as it unfolds. One of my most striking observations of BPS staff is how systemic their thinking is. Truly, since the beginning of my time at BPS, I have heard the word “coherence” uttered more times than I can remember, and found that staff and leadership alike are both inclined toward systems-level thinking about how to build real coherence in our system.

I suggest leveraging this enthusiasm and balancing it with the practical demands that the system currently faces by developing a three-year scope and sequence for coherence and system building at BPS. Explicitly co-creating milestones with all interested parties would help to clearly articulate the end state toward which the system-

level thinkers aspire. It would also provide helpful milestones along the way that can ease the fears of staff that want to tackle everything at the same time or rush into a system that does not presently exist. By (for example) spelling out when we address competencies we want to see in staff, how we better align professional learning to those competencies, when accountabilities for those competencies set in, etc., staff can know the trajectory leadership has in mind for reforming key structural aspects of the system that are widely recognized as out of sync or incoherent with our agenda for reform. Such a move would demonstrate earnest intent and interest in improving the system we share while also continuing to operate in the legacy we have inherited, demonstrating that we can and will reach our desired end state for integration in due time. It could also serve as an accountability mechanism in holding leadership accountable for important long-term system priorities, and for leadership to hold staff accountable for acting as their best selves that they have already shown interest in developing – even when it becomes hard to act on that virtue day to day.

A possible corollary to a scope and sequence might also be instituting awards for coherence. Such awards could happen at more frequent timelines and celebrate contributions that individuals or teams have made in uniting disparate parts of the system toward the same principles or priorities. Celebrating coherence can increase the cache of the word itself in staff vocabulary, and push staff to discuss coherence more frequently and celebrate it as it comes to life.

Sector Implications

I think that many of the recommendations I discuss in the implications for BPS have relevance for the entire K-12 public education sector, but one link that really stands

out to me across these recommendations has to do with the immense importance of practicing empathy in taking on leadership of the sector. I use the term empathy intentionally, as it is a trait that I feel like I have grown in immensely during my personal development within the Ed.L.D. program. In fact, I have come to characterize my own understanding of what leadership is through empathetic practice: to me, at its simplest level leadership *is* perspective taking. It is, as Edmondson (2012) describes, being “vigilantly aware of others’ needs, roles, and perspectives,” requiring both “affective (feeling) and cognitive (thinking) skills in order to learn to relate to others better and learning to make decisions based on the integration of different perspectives” (p. 2). It means taking time not just to understand the school leader or teacher experience – a call that is often echoed by front-line educators working in schools – but also that of the bureaucrat in central office who has lost faith in the district’s ability to lead. It also works in the reverse direction, with mid-level leaders – as I was in the past year – looking up to understand the immense pressures that our leaders are experiencing in making the tough choices they must face on a day-to-day basis.

Building relational capacity among the individuals doing the work can feel like it stands in tension with the deliberate role-based structure of teams, but it can flourish in the context of a rich task, and it is a key competency for building strong, resilient teams. In her 2002 book *The Southwest Airlines Way*, Gittell describes the term “relational capacity” or “relational competence” as the shared goals, shared respect, and shared knowledge that empowers individuals to work well together on teams. She argues that these tenets are particularly important in environments where tasks are reciprocally interdependent (i.e. “when each action taken by any participant has a potential influence

on multiple other participants”), subject to high levels of uncertainty (i.e. “requiring continuous updates of information and adjustments in plans”), and time bound (i.e. “time constraints limit an organization’s ability to use time buffers to reduce the [negative] effects of interdependence and uncertainty”) (Gittell, 2002, p. 49-50).

Gittell (2002) argues that teaming and teamwork ability “can be understood more specifically as relational competence – the ability to relate effectively with others” (p. 85). Team members at Southwest are intentionally trained to build their relational capacity as a way to enhance attainment of shared goals (which “motivate employees to move beyond what is best for their own narrow area of responsibility and act with regard for the overall work process”), shared knowledge (“regarding how their tasks are related to other tasks”), and shared respect (“for the work of others” which “encourages employees to value the contributions of others and to consider the impact of their actions on others”) (p. 35). This triad of core values in relational capacity center on a systems-level orientation to the work, reinforcing every single member of the team (line and leader alike) to act with sincere care for the overall work process rather than staying in their narrow lane of responsibility. Company leadership would argue relational capacity is not just good for business but necessary for them to get their jobs done, and that “relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect contribute substantially to effective coordination and therefore to quality and efficiency performance” (Gittell, 2002, p. 26). In other words, exhibiting relational competence is not just good for the more emotional side of liking or enjoying the company of one’s colleagues (though that sentiment is not one to be ignored); it is about enhancing productivity of the organization writ large. Understanding how one’s contributions fit

into the broader task environments helps individuals – on or off teams – in better understanding how to approach the work. In this way, relationship building becomes another way of getting the work done: it builds trust and empathy that have direct and latent potential to enhance organizational performance through the perspective-taking it fosters in co-producing or even just consulting on tasks.

The applications of these tenets of relational competence – and an overall orientation toward empathetic perspective-taking in the mantle of system-level leadership – has vast implications for the public education sector. At the heart of Gittell’s argument – much like that of Higgins et al. (2012) in their discussion of implementation teams – is honoring and respecting the vastness and value of the identity that each team member brings to the work. Gittell (2002) describes the previous experiences of an employee at Southwest who had previously worked elsewhere in the airline industry: “It is difficult to identify deeply with an organization in which one is encouraged or required to present a false self” (p. 115). An empathetic approach to leadership recognizes not only how deeply divided organizations are along functional or legacy lines but also how incredibly fragmented our own personal identities become in the workplace. As a team, each member comes to work daily “with multiple identities in tow,” navigating organizational waters that may seem calm on the surface but could very easily turn turbulent – especially considering the complex racial, political, and economic histories that run through organizations as deeply embedded in our communities as schools (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 4). Gittell (2002) describes the situation: “The division of labor is a powerful source of efficiency and productivity...but it results in alienation and fragmentation of human identity. Strong working relationships can serve to overcome the alienation

created by the division of labor by creating more holistic, social identities in place of the more partial and fragmented identities that lead people to reject their connections with others” (p. 43).

In essence, relational competence means getting to know someone for what they do *and* for who they are, fundamentally respecting them as a person as well as their contributions to the organization, their role on the team, and seeing how their many identities converge in the work. Building up this capacity can be a way to effectively drive organizational performance, creating unifying links within and across teams. Team members are united not only by task but more fully by identity, helping teams “to form a collective identity with others” and thus enabling them “to engage more easily in coordinated, collective action” (Gittell, 2002, p. 42).

I would argue that this sort of framing is fundamental for creating a safe environment and enabling the sort of collaboration needed for Edmondson’s conception of execution-as-learning. Characterized by shared recognition and sense-making around failures or challenges, execution-as-learning in a highly hierarchical environment can easily lead to conflict or avoidance behavior, often about the relationships through which the challenge or failures presented themselves rather than about the tasks themselves. Because of the difficulty of extricating the relationship aspects from the task aspects of a conflict or challenge, it becomes challenging for any team member (or team leader) to muster the emotional courage and fortitude it takes to perform serious and sober self-reflection about how individual actions or inactions contributed to the failure of a team. It is even harder to then relate that introspection to the broader organization systems that may allow that behavior to take place (or not take place) from the start. If the

environment does not feel psychologically safe, it becomes more challenging to look like a failure or appear incompetent in front of the group, as team members generally do not want to indict themselves in the problem (even when, in the case of Boston, the problem of practice already implicates the team as a whole). Intentionally training staff in empathetic team building (e.g. building relationships inside and outside the office; providing opportunities to shadow and learn what each team member does; encouraging team members to bring their whole selves to the experience, including discussion of non-work topics), builds a foundation of relational competence in the team. It also builds a base of empathy that helps team members remember the person behind the point of view when conflict inevitably breaks out. It can reduce the emotional toll that generally comes with admitting failure, mistakes, or defeat because team members keep in mind a fuller understanding of that person and what they are facing in and outside of their failure or mistake. It reminds people that we are much more than the one mistake or failure to which we have admitted.

Further, developing relational competence is incredibly important in a sector whose leaders never seem to escape the fierce urgency of the problems the sector faces. I heard this refrain early on in my time at BPS from an outgoing senior official as she left the district at the beginning of the current school year. After spending a year in leadership here, she concluded that district leaders in Boston and beyond are task oriented – but “not in the right way” (Personal communication, M. Wall, Aug. 2016). She argued that as a system we are oriented around tasks rather than being oriented around relationships. This hyper task focus, in her view, cultivates a culture of anxiety around getting things done, rather than a culture of trust built around relationships and caring for each other. In this

culture, the pace beleaguers people, which can cause contributions to diminish in quality or quantity as individuals and teams feel constantly under pressure. Without pauses in the work to breathe, or to recognize the depth and richness of the collaborators with whom we perform those tasks, it is possible to view our colleagues just as conduits of productivity without the more unique focus on the interpersonal dimensions of the environment that keep many people (like me) motivated to perform. It also becomes easier to write off colleagues (superiors and subordinates) and interpret their actions or inactions less charitably because there are so many possible opportunities for them to drop the ball and an insufficient well of trust for them to fall into when it happens. A focus on relational competence helps to build that trust from the beginning, encouraging all team members to think of whole people bringing full selves to the work rather than individuals toiling but sometimes failing to fulfill their full slate of duties (a formidable task considering the amount on each person's plate).

These lessons appear simplistic to me but no less critical as I continue to take up the mantle of leadership in the public education sector. As Gittell (2002) noted, "in sum, relationships shape our own personal identities: they define who we are" (p. 43). In viewing the job of leader as seeking to understand the task (and the world) through the eyes of others, we open up to more empathetic understanding of everyone around us, which can help us find new ways to effectively lead through such turbulent, complex task environments. We also vastly expand the scope of leadership responsibility in doing so: "Leadership is better understood as a process that can take place at any level of the organization" (Gittell, 2002, p. 74).

Finally, in recommending further study for the field, I believe that additional

research into the role of teams in implementing large-scale instructional improvement efforts and reforms both at central administrative offices for public school districts as well as in K-12 schools would be of tremendous value for the sector. As a structure, teams continue to be employed in efforts across the sector, often drawing from across organizational silos and levels of bureaucratic hierarchy as I described in my case study of BPS. It would be of value to continue to build on the work of Higgins et al. (2012) in continuing to discern optimal structure for teams implementing change in districts and the way teaming structures and behaviors can maximally interact with the bureaucracy that permeates public education systems.

Self Implications

Over the course of my residency and study of teams at BPS this year, I have come to realize how personally biased I am toward teams and how deeply engrained teaming is in me in getting the work done. I continue to remain struck by this fundamental question as presented by Wageman et al. in first needing to question whether or not, as a leader of change efforts at BPS, I really need a team to perform the specific task at hand. I am swayed by the authors' assertion "to make that decision deliberately," rather than "being strongly swayed either by traditional management models or by fantasies of how wonderful it would be if all the orchestra's senior leaders were in the same harness pulling in the same direction" (Wageman et al., 2008, p. 32). Too often I approach teams with that same collaborative but nonspecific spirit that I have witnessed in BPS leadership, approaching with enthusiasm in place of serious consideration of what is needed and best for the task at hand. I need to adopt the same type of rigorous vetting of needs and structure before making moves to form teams, much like I describe under site

implications for BPS in developing a team launch process.

In assessing my own performance as a doctoral resident and Director of Instructional Strategy, I make a similar evaluation as I did for my team: while the ASSET leadership team appears to have made some great progress, I am not certain that as a coach I led the team to where it needs to be to sustain the work. While we were able to get a lot of the work done, the team is still in development. The team largely agreed in recent reflections, with members indicating that we are still in some stages of forming or storming, and that we are not yet the team we have hoped for. Nonetheless, with the progress we have attained – which has at least as much to do with the courage and willingness of this group of leaders to show up and be led as it does with the leadership and coaching I provided – I am optimistic for the future state of the ASSET team and their capacity to do work together in the years to come. To reflect back on Edmondson, teaming is a verb and not a static entity, and the team is constantly in development. Even with the journey that is yet to come, the ASSET leadership team retains strong potential to keep moving toward its ultimate vision as instructional roundtable for the district.

However, as a fellow member of the team told me, *I am ASSET*. In other words, in her view, we formed as an ASSET team with insufficient structure in place for becoming a real team. I came in and inherited the big bet the district made on the ASSET reorganization, entrusted to steward and lead the ASSET leadership team into becoming a team. While at first this observation flattered me in realizing how much I was entrusted with, my reaction quickly turned to discouragement about the ability for the work of this team to keep moving forward. I am cognizant of the outsized role that I have played in managing and steering this group to its present state, as well as my personal upholding of

many of the structural elements that keep the team forging ahead. I think my coaching of the team has been successful in yielding a greater sense of teamness today, but it still has a good way to go until it is a fluidly self-governing body. Much of the challenge is due to the ongoing interpersonal challenge of taking risks and serving new purposes in an environment that – while espousing the values of a flat organization and cross-functionally tackling problems – still largely operates hierarchically.

Still another part of the challenge is the overall struggle with system-level coherence, making it difficult for the ASSET team to understand its unique purpose and role in the broader organizational context. The amount of trust generated in the team through their assiduous work on key tasks (essentially performances of their understanding of interdependence) gives me hope that the work continues to grow organically. However, I worry that I insufficiently planned and executed for transition of team leadership over to a more self-governed body – especially in the incredibly demanding task environment that is BPS. The team is still mostly only hierarchically poised to be pressured toward their own individual accountabilities and not those of the ASSET leadership team. Further concern emerged through my own reflection on the broader organizational context in which ASSET is situated: as the Superintendent pointed out to me, while ASSET has deliberately been integrating amongst its member departments and seeking to build coherence as a division, the rest of the organization remains largely siloed. Building beyond silos in other parts of the organization is the work of continued coherence building. Nonetheless, as an implication for myself, in retrospect I should have thought more this year about the ways that a team like the ASSET leadership team that is deliberately seeking higher degrees of interdependence

might constructively organize and act in the context of a less coherence-driven organization. This is not to say suggest that we should find ways to work around incoherence elsewhere: indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 4, one can find ways to exploit that incoherence if desired. Nonetheless, I could have given greater thought to which elements of broader organization-wide coherence we could have sought to complement our internal coherence building efforts.

In further reflection on my personal theory of action for residency year, I am also struck by my omission of two explicit “if” statements as well as the foundational conclusion of the “then” statement which I sought. First, I omitted an “if” statement around systems-level politics and understanding, which in retrospect feels glaring considering the number of takeaways I had in this domain in Chapter 4. I recognized its value going in (as described by my “broader mandate” in Chapter 1), but I did not formally codify it in my theory of action. This omission is telling to me: just because I view these actions as requisite and implied, or because it is hard to quantify exactly what and how one goes about the politicking and construction of social capital, that does not mean it is no less critical to successful execution of the work. This is a particular skill set that I am continuously developing and that will be critical in any future leadership positions toward which I aspire in the sector. As political work is often shrugged off in a sector that would sometimes like to (hopelessly) see itself as “apolitical,” I need to continue to think about how I present and portray this critical political work in an accessible and nonthreatening way. Performing this type of landscape analysis – and getting an understanding of what makes those in the organization really tick – is a required part of a coherence building agenda. I will not be successful in asking critical

questions about how the system works – let alone in making recommendations or taking actions to substantially change the system – without exercising my relational capacity and building up a well of trust, capital, and relationship on which to ground all of my efforts.

I also omitted an “if” statement on some of the more personal aspects of my own approach to leadership that undoubtedly played a role in my success as Director of Instructional Strategy during my residency year. My supervisor and mentor during the year would remind me frequently that she asked me to join the team in this role because of the specific ways that she had seen me operate on teams – namely, for my strengths in facilitation of bridging divides of difference to allow others’ defenses to come down, to deliver truth, and to still maintain team member engagement and productivity afterwards. This was not only a huge avowal of her confidence in my leadership abilities, but also an enormous reminder for me that I am taking some of my leadership strategies and moves for granted, especially when it comes to areas of relative ease, comfort, or strength for me personally around the authentically building relationships with others. I believe my ability stems from a genuine interest, appreciation, and curiosity for the myriad gifts that my peers bring to the team; I try to pose it as an inquiry stance in everything I do. As Gittell discusses, learning more about not only the special contributions someone brings to the team but also more about who they are helps me to grow closer to them, which not only benefits the work through the building of trust and empathy but for me also makes the work genuinely more enjoyable. A large part of what has driven me forward in every organization I have worked in for my entire career is the quality and extent of the relationships I have built with others. These bonds are arguably my greatest leadership success: they have not only left the products I have co-produced with my teammates

stronger and more durable, but they have left an indelible impression on me that keeps me humble in my continuous learning and in perpetual awe of what I can produce only through authentic collaboration with others.

Additionally, in reflecting on my “then” statement from my theory of action, I was reminded by the Superintendent that we will have been successful in our pursuit of Strategic Implementation Plan initiatives not just if we achieve milestones but only if we genuinely went about the work a different way. As I discussed in my analysis in Chapter 4, simply accumulating outputs does not guarantee the impact sought after in Focus Area #1 of truly implementing a rigorous, inclusive, and culturally and linguistically sustaining instructional program that develops the whole child – a peak that we can only reach if we climb together. While I think we made good progress toward this big goal this year, I am struck by the evolution of my thinking over the course of this year; it reflects how far my own learning has come in understanding how and what teams produce.

Conclusion

Despite the historical legacy and vast organizational structures that put the odds against their success, I believe teams and teaming are the right response to the seemingly intractable problems our education systems continue to face in the 21st century. Bearing in mind all I have described in my analysis and the thought I have put forward overall in this capstone, it would be a mistake to conclude that teaming is fruitless – or a task so profoundly misaligned with the current state of public K-12 bureaucracies that it is better to invest time and efforts for change elsewhere. I have observed over the course of the year that teaming can often be uncomfortable. It takes firm, steady leadership to lead a team clearly through the challenges to purpose that it routinely experiences as teams face

a deluge of urgent and important tasks. It also takes radical perseverance to keep teaming intentionally collaborative and respectful even when the intra- and interpersonal conflicts arise amongst and within team members. It can often feel easier to default back to the function-specific silos that districts have operated on for decades, yielding to their momentum as a reliable (albeit flawed) way to get work done.

After a year of careful study and experience on teams in Boston's central administrative offices, I maintain full resolve that teams are useful and even a requisite path to get to our aspirational end state. Teaming well, though, will require us to go about our work differently in order to seek the results we want, asking us to subvert our inclination toward the hierarchical path of least resistance to really reconsider and reexamine the way we get even basic work done. While the individual maverick approach is certainly expeditious, it has large potential to undercut vertical and horizontal collaboration within organizations that teams seek to leverage, and in passing over a systemic response, it also has the potential to perpetuate or exploit (rather than dismantle) the inequities of the current system.

Absent concerted efforts to cultivate the right task environment, teams, their membership, and the change efforts they seek to implement are likely to languish – but this is not an uncontrollable fate. Districts like BPS will experience significant benefit from taking on the reflection that its leaders know is crucial for adults to learn. Organizational reflection and learning is the first step toward more successful teaming in districts, taking a comprehensive look at not only the tasks we are asking teams to perform but also the environment in which those tasks exist to more thoroughly understand what we are asking individuals to do in concert with other individuals and

tasks. This is the heart of Edmondson's (2012) concept of execution-as-learning: taking a careful look at the "constant, unremarkable, small-scale learning into day-to-day work," as a sort of "reflection-in-action, rather than reflection-after-action" (p. 30). This effort must be assimilated into the processes of doing the work itself. If our behaviors and mindsets do not change, then a reliance on teams has potential to turn into work avoidance than a method for getting important work (including dealing with problems that involve conflict and confusion) done – which ultimately can preserve the status quo and distance district leadership from the system it has envisioned to better address teaching and learning needs.

Even amidst the demands and urgency of district leadership, I fundamentally believe this type of inquiry orientation and learning stance is possible in a place like BPS. On a personal level, it requires district leaders (including me) to recommitment to the stubborn nature of systems-level leadership: we must continue to have faith that small actions every day are what move massive systems. It has been my experience over the last ten months that change happens no other way. Lest I lose heart that change is not possible or that it moves too slow, I remind myself of the sage reminder that I have gotten from my capstone committee again and again – namely, that education systems were not set up for what we are asking them to do today. In fact, like in most governmental institutions, they were deliberately devised to make change move slowly and deliberately. (Of all times in my life, that last statement has never been more applicable or hopeful.) I move forward with a full heart, a sharpened intellect, and a fierce optimism that my work in leading the sector is the work of systems redesign, slowly yet deliberately moving to build a thoroughly crafted and empathetically defined "us" to get the results we really

want to achieve.

Let's keep going – together.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Problem of Practice and Instructional Theory of Action for Boston Public Schools

Problem of Practice:

BPS does not consistently provide authentic learning opportunities for our students who are most marginalized to develop into self-determined, independent learners, able to pursue their aspirations. Our failures lead to disengaged students and significant achievement gaps.

Instructional Theory of Action:

Introductory Statement of Belief: As adult learners committed to equity, we must engage in and reflect on systemic and individual biases and their impact on our practices.
If we:
[1] Invest the entire BPS community in the necessity of this work, including a multi-year trajectory of developing culturally and linguistically sustaining practices.
[2] Maintain our focus on cognitively demanding tasks (CDTs) and instructional foci (IF) with a specific focus on our most marginalized students.
[3] Create structures, tools, and coaching to help school leaders and teams confront biases and belief systems.
[4] Analyze and address systemic structures that promote exclusionary practices.
[5] Provide ongoing professional development and support to create inclusive, welcoming safe schools.
[6] Create structures, tools, and coaching to support disciplinary literacy that ensures universal access for all students
<i>Then...students will be cognitively and socio-emotionally engaged and be prepared to be the leaders, advocates, entrepreneurs and innovators of tomorrow.</i>

Appendix B

Strategic Implementation Plan initiatives “owned” by the Academics and Student Supports for Equity Team (ASSET)

Focus Area #1: Implement an inclusive, rigorous, and culturally/linguistically sustaining PK-12 instructional program that serves the development of the whole child.

- 1.1. Provide quality curricular and instructional guidance and resources to support instruction that develops literacy, language, and knowledge acquisition across contents, while promoting social emotional wellness.
- 1.2. Expand, redesign and enrich English Language Learner programming and services.
- 1.3. Expand, redesign and enrich Special Education programming and services.
- 1.4. Expand, redesign and enrich programming and services for students of color.
- 1.5. Expand equitable access to high-quality early education seats.
- 1.6. Pilot, and then expand, the 4th through 6th grade initiative “Excellence for All.”
- 1.7. Expand and deepen access to World Language and Visual and Performing Arts.

Appendix C

Academic and Student Supports for Equity Team (ASSET) Meeting Structures

“D/S” = Deputy Superintendent

“A/S” = Assistant Superintendent

“Dir.” = Director

Meeting	Frequency	Duration	Location	Attendees	Objectives	Activities
Tactical	1x daily (M-F)	15 min	Dial-in	1 D/S 5 A/Ss 2 Dirs.	Raise urgent issues or events to be aware of from each department – in order to prevent/address fires and foster collaboration	Stand (do not sit) and quickly deliver high-level updates (few details, >1 per person). No substitute members; if you must be absent, send bullets beforehand that Karla/Mary can share.
					Review daily agendas: from your schedule or workflow coming out today	“”
					Receive key updates or to-dos from Sup (e.g. “priority of the day”)	End with key due-outs.
Strategy – Team	1x weekly (day TBD)	120 min	Bolling	1 D/S 5 A/Ss 2 Dirs. 1 Data An.	Check in on progress and address stuck points on SIP goals and milestones (collectively “holding feet to fire”)	<u>SIP improvement cycles</u> (1x per month): format will vary, but each A/S will highlight biggest areas of progress, biggest areas of challenge, and broad overview of whether or not on-track across all areas of ownership
					Foster data curiosity and collaborative consumption/interpretation of data	<u>Data dialogues</u> (1x per month): perform deep dive on data related to a problem of practice, chosen by A/Ss; review and prepare for Cabinet data dialogue that month
					Spark and sustain cross-functional professional learning to foster a sense of what high-quality, effective	<u>School visits</u> (1x per month): instructional rounds-type approach, wherein an A/S picks a school and focus

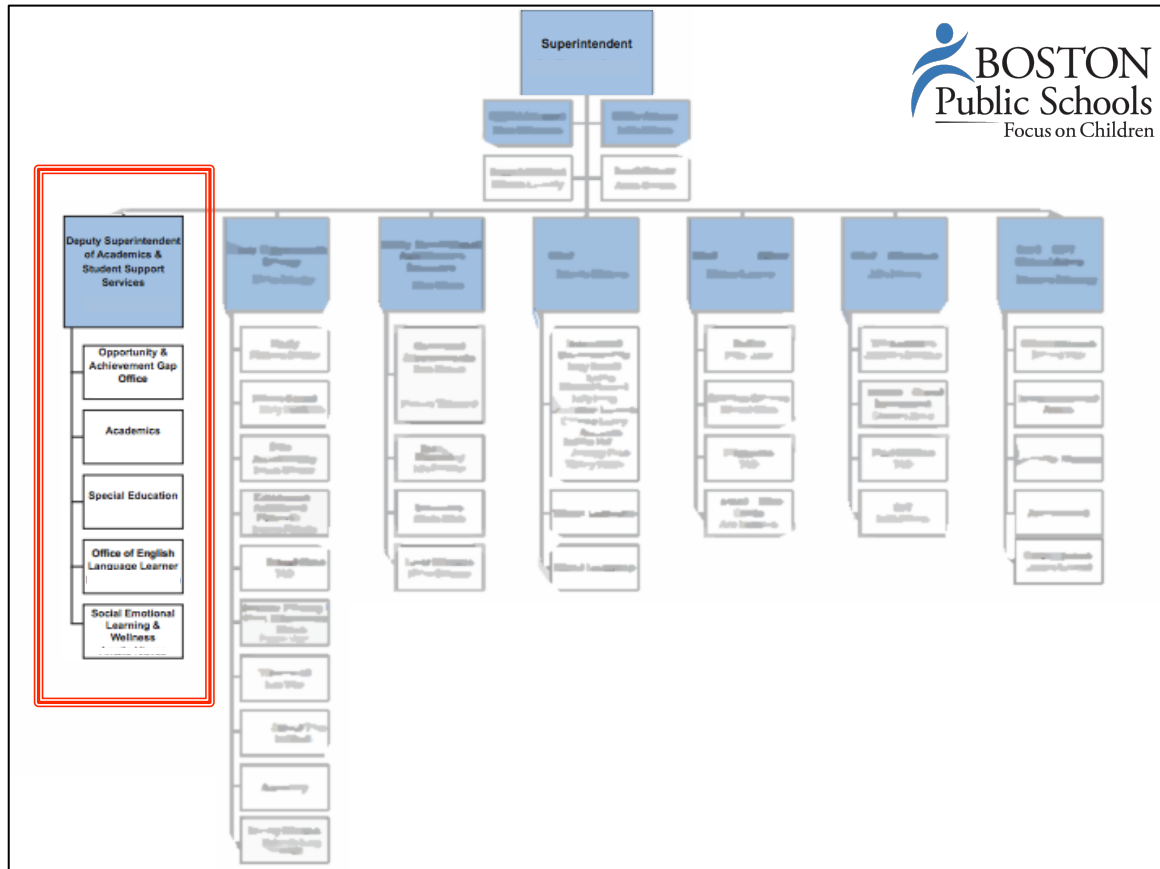
					teaching and learning looks like through each departmental lens	question; arranges visits to particular classrooms; and leads debriefs
					Practice collaboration as an interdepartmental BPS team by tackling problems or experiences that are central to instructional practice together, and that build value and use of our shared structures	<u>IS/OS/ASSET Sync Up:</u> (1x per month): TBD, but topics to include: PD development, tuning, norming
					Build unity and “brand” as an ASSET leadership team	Use and reference ASSET team habits of mind.
Strategy – Individual	2x monthly	60 min	D/S office	1 D/S 1 A/Ss 1 ED 1 Dir	Check in with A/S and ED on management and execution of dept. Priorities and SIP implementation, with personalized attention and feedback for troubleshooting/support Foster team leadership development among #1 and #2s of each department	Standing meeting agenda categories, with items for discussion populated by EDs. Review progress and implementation on SIP priorities and timelines (jointly held among A/Ss as appropriate). Questions directed by D/S (in dedicated time within meeting) about the “how” of leadership style and tactics to meet department goals as department teams
Leadership Check-In’s	4x yearly	60 min	Bolling	1 D/S 1 A/S	Engage in two-way dialogue and feedback on leadership practices of D/S and A/S	Leadership coaching of A/S by D/S, with additional reflection on how D/S can better lead A/S and the team
Retreat	3x yearly	½ to full day	Off-site	1 D/S 5 A/Ss 2 Dirs. 1 Data An.	Take a step back to re-engage and re-dedicate ourselves to our strategic priorities Build unity as an ASSET leadership team; spend quality, enjoyable time together (As needed) Tackle bigger-picture problems of practice in	Reflective protocols on intended versus lived strategies; grounding ourselves in the imperative of our efforts Engage in non-traditional activities (e.g. a hike, a conference, etc.) Collect list of toughest to tackle problems over the course of each

					longer sessions	quarter. Bring forward through protocols.
All ASSET Meeting	1x monthly	2-3 hours	Bolting	1 D/S 5 A/Ss 5 EDs 2 Dirs. All ASS ET staff	Professional learning together on high-priority instructional initiatives or needs for the district. Norming around key terms, structures, and frameworks that we use as a district to pursue instructional improvement.	Activities vary: tuning of PD modules for teachers or principals; rollout/feedback of a new tool; brainstorming on how to tackle interdepartmental / cross-functional challenges; etc.
Cross Functional Learning Meeting	2x monthly	90 min	Bolting	5 A/Ss	Learn about each other and learn about each other's work. Build deeper relationships as a cross-functional team and as a collaborative of cross-functional teams.	[to be determined by A/Ss]

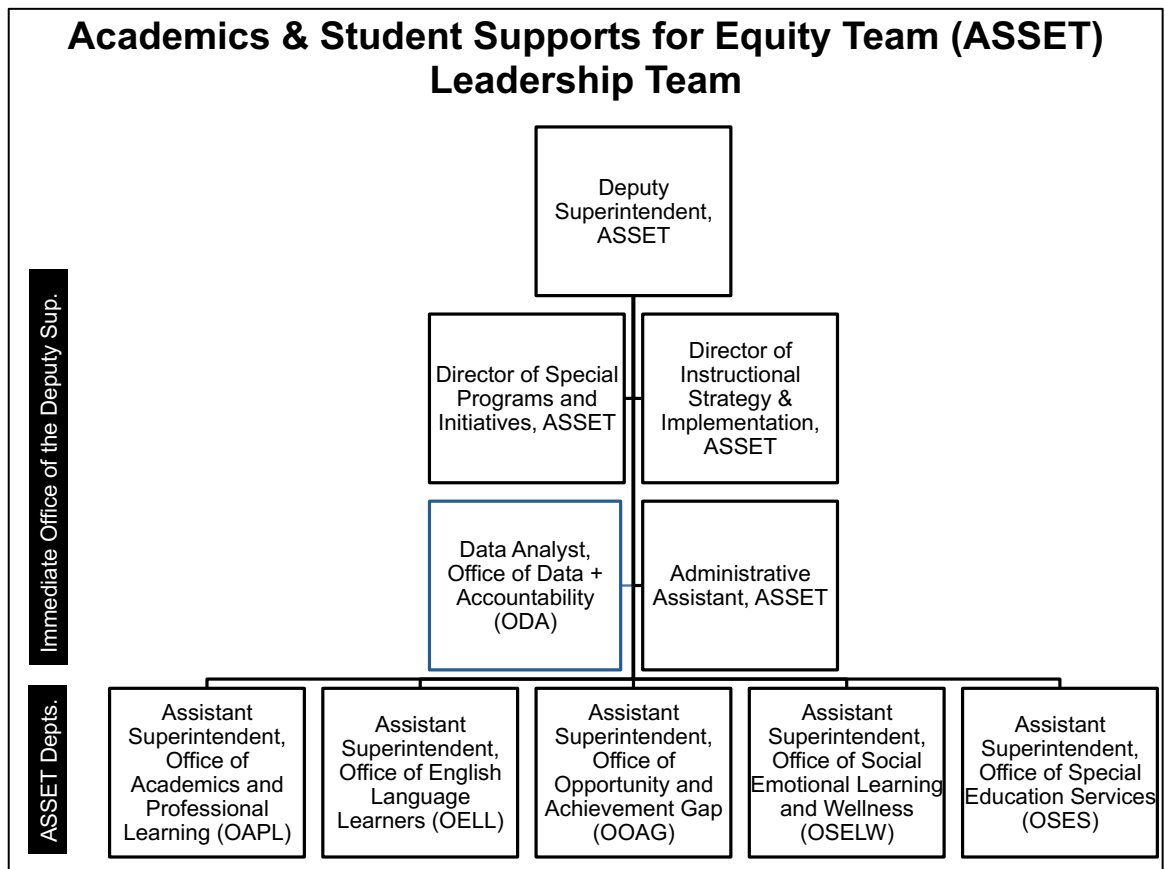
Appendix D

Boston Public Schools Organizational Charts

1. Academics and Student Supports for Equity (ASSET) on the Boston Public Schools organizational chart



2. Organizational Chart for the ASSET Leadership Team



Appendix E

Full text of open-ended survey questions

11a. After answering a scaled question on the item, “I make use of supports offered by central office to strengthen or improve instruction,” respondents were asked: “Why/why not?” Their responses were:

- “All central offices should have staff available as long as schools are open. Principals should have a line to call for every office that gets answered.”
- “I leverage the expertise of specific individuals with whom I've built relationships and about whom I know their specific skill sets. The help I am able to secure for the benefit of my school community is more grounded in the effectiveness of my personal network than in institutional structures. There are lots of individuals with tremendous and valuable expertise. OHC seems to be only office that effectively leverages the individual skill sets of its people to make a team that is stronger than the sum of its parts.”
- “There is little expertise in the areas that I need support.”
- “Supports offer useful strategies, skills, although I often have to tailor them myself to suit my school context.”
- “Supports are not shared equitably across the district.”
- “Seems pointless to request help that can't or won't be delivered”
- “We have asked for some supports but there seems to be a lack of expertise and/or time in our areas of need.”
- “When I don't it's because I can't get in touch with the people I need to be in communication with.”
- “I feel that I am on my own for instruction and planning at the school. TLT Leaders are critical and not helpful. They do not support work with families and often cause more confusion. The TLT leaders can be inconsistent among the team and with principals.”
- “Depends on the department.”
- “Some departments are too bureaucratic and have no idea how schools work.”

Open-ended comments at end of survey were:

- “This survey is challenging because my experience varies widely across departments and individuals, which is why so many responses veered toward the center. I don't know what central office's priorities or goals are. I know what we espouse as a district (in terms of our current focus on [culturally and linguistically sustaining practices]). I do not see us live that across departments and individuals. I wonder how many folks at central office know what our current priorities and goals are AND how they fit into those goals.”
- “As a team, OHC is awesome. There is consistent messaging, their purpose is clear, they offer clear support in service of getting the best people in front of our students, and the team consistently seeks input to continuously improve. Each year, there are things to point to that are even stronger than the year before. <insert sounds of angels singing>”

- “Other departments (OOAG, Budget, ELT, OFSE) have proven useful because I have been able to build relationships with individuals within those departments who are extremely helpful. But they don't seem as universally effective and coherent as OHC is. (It definitely took OHC time to get to that place...it's a whole different experience working with them than it was 3 years ago. I could see each of these departments becoming that effective.)”
- “I'm not even sure if some departments exist anymore, or if they do, what is reasonable to expect from them. What is the current version of IR&D/Curriculum and Assessment? What do they have the capacity to do? It's not clear to me what I should expect from ODA. Are there reports or tools they should be offering or making us aware of at the school level? Do we have to know about them to ask for them?”
- “We need the people from central to come to the schools and give the school hands-on support. . . . There hasn't anyone who has come to our school to support teachers. Perhaps I am not clear about the model that is being ‘deployed.’”
- “Central Office support is uneven – some teams are very responsive and very helpful, others less so. It often seems like departments are not communicating about due dates, timelines and asks of school leaders. Often we will have a number of deadlines that at the same time, particularly around eval and budget season. The central office should keep a master calendar of deadlines for school leaders so that reports and deadlines can be reasonably spaced out.”
- “Central office staff needs to return emails and/or answer phone calls. Very frustrating to call a department...and not get a response, a reply or a solution to a problem.”
- “The central office does a lot to support schools. My instructional leader...is extremely supportive and helps me be a better leader. I have found most central office responsive and helpful. Lead BPS is a helpful way to communicate.”
- “Overall the supports are consistent with most departments. [Some] departments...are not as responsive or clear with their assistance or overall demands on schools and school leaders. Seemingly items are last minute and not well thought out with regards to asks, completion or timeliness.”
- “I would prefer to be supported by my colleagues. Make time for principals to learn from each other.”
- Regarding a specific office: “Anytime a school or department has high levels of turnover, institutional knowledge is nonexistent or not valued, and everyone at all times seems to operate in [Cover Your Ass, or CYA] mode, the problem is at the top. It is a challenge to get questions answered. Often conflicting information is given by different people in response to the same question. Schools are routinely being put in the position of having to make choices that are impossible and then are blamed for them regardless of what the decision is. [Staff] are poorly supported and are given the runaround when they ask reasonable questions. Multiple similar questions from different people are heard as a pile on instead of understood as a natural consequence of not providing answers the first time a question is asked.”
- Regarding a specific office: “[Office] continues to feel more like an adversary of

my work than an ally. I've been continuously blindsided by the outcomes of "secret" meetings of staff...who continue to lack transparency and a clear understanding of schools. OHC continues to be a standout team; they are helpful, responsive, and have a clear sense of what principals are doing. Whoever made OHC what it is today should begin working with other offices.”